
ANIME ANYWAY
TRANSLATIONS
CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 3
2
衣笠彰梧
KINUGASA SYOUGO
TOMOSESHUNSAKU
トモセシュンサク


Welcome to the
Classroom of the Elite
Year 3
Shogo Kinuaga
Tomose Shunsaku
2


Welcome to the Classroom of the Third-year



A Note to Readers

From the Translation Team

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We're passionate fans just like you, and we work on these projects in our free time out of love for the story and characters. However, we strongly encourage you to purchase the official releases if and when they become available in your region to support the author and the publisher.

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Editor's Foreword

This volume has been carefully translated with the intention of striking a balance between faithfulness to the Japanese text and readability in English. Throughout the process, specialized edits were employed to transition from literal translation into prose that feels like a novel, while preserving the context, tone, and detail of the original.

Japanese prose, often carries a self-contained quality, with expressions that are concise yet layered rich in nuance. When rendered directly into English, such passages can appear abrupt or lose the subtle emotion the author intended. To resolve this, some sentences were restructured or expanded slightly, not to alter the meaning, but to ensure the flow and rhythm matched the natural reading expectations of English.

Take for example the line:
金田はどこか決意を持った態度を残し、この場を後にした。
Literal rendering: "Kaneda left the room, his demeanor carrying a trace of some quiet resolve."
Final translation: "With a faint but unmistakable air of resolve, his footsteps faded into the hush of the library as he turned and left."

Here, the literal version captures the essence, but it feels plain. In the final phrasing, imagery and rhythm are expanded to highlight the quiet atmosphere and Kaneda's resolve without adding meaning that isn't there. This way, the line reads more naturally in English prose, while still carrying the weight of the original.

Another instance is:
高育の図書室はとても広いため、本を探すのと同じくらい人を探すのも難しい。
Literal rendering: "The Kōiku library is so spacious that finding a person here is just as difficult as finding a book."
Final translation: "The school's library was vast, its towering shelves and

wide aisles making it just as tricky to find a person as it was to locate a specific book."

The literal translation is clear, but a little blunt. By expanding with light descriptive elements like "towering shelves," and "wide aisles" the English version paints the same idea in a way that flows like a scene in a novel, enhancing atmosphere while keeping true to the intent of the Japanese.

Such restructuring is not about adding embellishment but about bridging the expressive gap between two languages, and recreate the intended feel for the reader. English, being versatile and flexible, sometimes requires additional words to convey what Japanese implies within a few compact syllables.

This philosophy also guided our approach to environmental description. In places where the Japanese text provided only the barest of details, we have taken careful creative liberty to expand the scene, ensuring smoother transitions and a sense of atmosphere. Each choice was made with deliberate attention to ensure no distortion of context, so that no detail was invented beyond what the story itself allows.

It is our hope that these choices preserve the atmosphere and emotional weight of the original, while offering you an experience that feels fluid and immersive in English.

And with that— welcome to the second installment of the Year 3 Arc of **Classroom of the Elite** (Yōkoso Jitsuryoku Shijō Shugi no Kyōshitsu e). We hope you enjoy reading this volume as much as we enjoyed bringing it to you.

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Prologue: Nanase Tsubasa's Monologue

❖

"How could this happen...?"

In the hospital room, as he was laying unconscious, I murmured quietly.

"He's been diagnosed with a prolonged disorder of consciousness, hasn't he?"

The voice was devoid of emotion, stating the fact with clinical detachment. As the words hung in the air, the man gently brushed his fingers across the nameplate affixed to the bed with Matsuo Eiichiro written on its surface.

A prolonged disorder of consciousness. In simpler terms, a vegetative state.

His eyes may open. He may breathe on his own. But there is no awareness, no recognition of the world around him, no response.

Doctors said it is possible he would regain consciousness within a few weeks or months, but... but even so, that hope was faint.

"I heard Matsuo-kun was a very kind-hearted man."

"Yes.. If I.. If only I had noticed something was wrong, none of this would've happened to Eiichiro-kun. No... I never would've *let* it happen..."

Overwhelmed by regret and sorrow, tears kept streaming endlessly.

"Kindness alone isn't enough to survive in this world. Rather it will make you prey to the most evil, unforgivable of demons..." The man murmured those words, then turned to me with a faint smile.

"This world is built on give-and-take. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I appreciate your generous protection."

After being turned away from one hospital after another, this man was the one who eventually found somewhere for him to be treated. Had we been even thirty minutes late, Eiichiro-kun's life could have been lost.

"What is it you want from me?"

"I have brought you an opportunity to settle your grudge."

"*An opportunity...*?"

"I will tell you how to get close to the person you want to take revenge on."

As he said this, the man placed an *enrollment form* and a photo on the table

"What is.."

"Enrolling in the Advanced Nurturing High School is the only way to get close to your target—"

"...Before that, I just realized I never asked your name... Who are you?"

"Pardon me. My name is Tsukishiro. I've known you and Matsuo-kun since you were both little."

"I've seen plenty of adults who pretend they know everything about us but truly don't."

"Is Shirogane-san doing well?"

Just hearing that name made my body tense despite my attempt to remain calm. I tried to keep my composure, but the reaction was instinctive.

He did know us.

And in that moment, I realized that he wasn't lying.

"So you are an acquaintance of Shirogane-sensei?"

"Back in my younger days, I was deeply *indebted* to Shirogane-san."

He looks to be about the same age as Shirogane-sensei. If that's the case then that *debt* must mean something very different from what it means for us.

"You are not evil. But in the world I live in, no matter where I look, it's filled with nothing but evil. Either doing evil deeds under the pretense of justice, or not even pretending at all. But you, Nanase Tsubasa-san, are different. Ordinary, yet capable. Ordinary, yet unpolished. Ordinary, yet talented. Sometimes this is what can defeat evil. That is my belief, born from living in this world."

"Tsukishiro-san, right? Is this boy connected to the *evil* you spoke of?"

In the photo before me was a boy about the same age as me.

"He is Ayanokoji Kiyotaka. A key link to the one you seek revenge on. As of now, he is enrolled in Advanced Nurturing High School one year ahead of you and is living his life among the ordinary students."

"So you want me to get close to him?"

"Yes. I'll give you instructions along the way. Everything is in service of your revenge. We'll adapt as the situation demands, but be careful. That boy may seem emotionless, but he's sharp, his instincts are refined. If you approach him carelessly, he'll see right through you."

"Then, what should I do?"

“You have to weave lies with truth. It is a fact that you adore Matsuo Eiichiro-kun and your desire to avenge him is genuine. You should create a new identity using that as a foundation, and act accordingly so he cannot grasp your true intentions. Naturally, he will doubt you, but he won’t dig too deep. He’ll dismiss you as insignificant.”

“Let me ask you one last question. Why me?”

“Because you are in just the right position. Neither left nor right, it's unclear which way you'll fall, So, I judged you to be the ideal person to send.”

“And.. what if I side with Ayanokoji?..”

“I will think about that when it comes to it.”

'You’ll do it, right?' being asked that, I nodded without hesitation.

Sometimes I still remember this exchange as if it was just a dream. At that time in the hospital, my mind was made up on taking revenge. I was set on Ayanokoji Atsuomi, the man who drove Eiichiro-kun to this *state*.

But now, things have changed.

I want to help Ayanokoji-senpai.

I wish to do so from my heart.

If he graduates from Advanced Nurturing High School as he is now, he will tread a path of pure evil. More victims, like Eiichiro-kun, may be created by his hand.

I don’t want that to happen.

I, who knows about the danger, have to be the one to keep it from happening.

For this, even today, I continue to search for that small key, deep within the forest.

Chapter 1: Blending in

❖

Sunday morning. Peering out the window of my room, I saw that it would unfortunately be one of those days with rain stretching from morning till night. Not quite a downpour, but the kind of weather which is enough to make you reluctant to step outside, even with an umbrella.

By the time it was nearly ten, I had finished getting dressed and grabbed a single umbrella before heading down to the dorm lobby. As I stepped into the elevator, I noticed the floor was wet, evidence that students had been going in and out since early morning.

“Yo, mornin'.”

As soon as I reached the first floor and the elevator doors opened, a male student in a hoodie standing by the entrance turned around, raised a hand, and greeted me. It was my classmate, Yoshida.

“Morning.”

After we finished our brief greetings, Yoshida immediately turned his gaze toward the sofa.

“Shimazaki came down a little while ago too.” he said

As if he heard those words, Shimazaki stood up and removed a single white wireless earbud from his right ear. He slipped it into a small case he’d taken from his bag, probably one made just for those earbuds.

“What were you listening to?”

Keeping pace with Yoshida, I approached Shimazaki and asked him.

“English listening practice for the entrance exams. I'm personally not what you'd call good at English, so I want to make use of every spare minute while I can.”

It seemed he didn't want to waste even the slightest bit of time he spent waiting for his classmates.

“Huh? You're bad at English? Don't you get better scores than me?”

Yoshida looked up at the ceiling and groaned, as if trying to recall past test results.

“It's meaningless to compare myself to you. It's actually my weakest subject.”

“Yeah, whatever? My bad for makin' the comparison then.”

Though he looked displeased, Yoshida apologized.

Shimazaki has the academic ability and grades to naturally rank among the top of our year, but it's likely because he's aware of his weaknesses and diligently works on them that he achieves such results.

As third-year students with entrance exams approaching. This level of awareness is just what you'd expect from former Class A students.

“I thought that was a sarcastic remark, but you're not getting angry?”

I had the impression that Yoshida is quite short-tempered, but he didn't seem particularly angry at Shimazaki's comment.

“Well, it bugs me a little, but this guy is always studying and nothing else. I'm not that passionate about studying, and it's a fact that there's a gap between us.”

That's how Yoshida answered, but it might also just be that the two of them are good friends.

“Seriously though, haven't you done nothing but studying lately?”

“I wonder. I make sure to set aside at least five hours a day on it, but that's about it.”

This five-hour period, of course, does not include school classes.

I don't know how much time the average third-year high school student devotes to self-study, but that’s certainly not a short amount of time.

Yoshida made a dramatic gesture with his hands, as if to say there was no way he could do five hours.

“The right given to Class A graduates is just a trump card. Doing this much is a given if you want to get into a good university, and it's not just me saying this. I'm heading to the cram school at Keyaki Mall this evening too.”

> **Translator’s Note:** Cram school, or *'Juku'* (塾), is a private school that holds lectures to many students at a time to help them prepare for exams or help people who failed a year. Lectures usually take place in the evening, and students can only attend for a fee.

“Seriously? Just how much are you gonna study…?”

Come to think of it, there was a cram school in the Keyaki mall set up by the Advanced Nurturing High School. It was a place irrelevant to me, so I'd never stopped by. I'd heard that even without private points, you could attend for free if you met certain conditions, such as having no problems with your usual conduct and having a clear vision for your future, like a specific university you want to attend.

“A cram school, huh. How many students actually go there?”

When I asked Shimazaki out of simple curiosity, for some reason, he glared at me slightly.

“You don't know? Speaking just for the third-years, there are 20 students as of now. Even then, compared to normal high schools, that’s a pretty low percentage. It’ll probably increase even more as we head into summer.”

So that's how many students are starting to prepare for their entrance exams.

“It's not like your grades are bad, but shouldn't you at least show your face there?” Shimazaki said trying to be encouraging

Compared to Shimazaki, Yoshida is certainly inferior, but he still possesses high academic ability.

If he's considering a university, it wouldn't be strange for him to start attending.

Shimazaki probably recommended it with good intentions, but Yoshida immediately refused.

“No way, no way. I'm fine with just a so-so university, just a decent one. I can't stand being holed up studying even on my days off when I'm supposed to be hanging out with friends. It's suffocating, isn't it? Just studying all the time.”

He said this, declining as he glanced at Shimazaki, who always studied so seriously.

“If that's the case, then fine. I have no intention of forcing you to study. That’s exactly why, as long as I’m not bothering anyone, I’m free to do whatever I want, whenever and wherever I please.”

Shimazaki's brow furrowed as he glared at Yoshida, perhaps feeling that his attitude toward studying had been dismissive.

“O-of course, it's your choice. Don't get so mad.”

In response, Yoshida frantically held up his open palms and offered an apology.

“Ahem, so anyways, What's the reason you called me and Ayanokoji out on our day off?”

Clearing his throat, Yoshida asked Shimazaki, as if to change the subject.

It was a precious day off, a day he would normally spend studying on his own. It was only natural to wonder why someone like Shimazaki would call us out.

“To be honest, my business is only with Ayanokoji, but we're not exactly on terms where we can just go out or consult each other one-on-one. I figured things would go more smoothly if you were here.”

So Yoshida wasn’t actually involved in the main reason for this meetup. But with the word ‘*consult’* now in the mix, the real motive behind Shimazaki’s invitation was starting to take shape.

“So that's it. Well, I'm the type who's naturally relied upon a lot.”

Yoshida squinted his eyes slightly in amusement, pretending to be troubled by it.

“Anyway, since you asked, I'll cooperate properly. Ayanokoji, make sure you give Shimazaki some proper advice.”

He added, casually resting a hand on my shoulder.

“That depends on the topic of the consultation. What exactly were you planning to consult me about?”

As Shimazaki said, my relationship with him isn't close at all, there's still some distance between us. There must be a clear reason why he'd go out of his way to consult someone like that. Another thing that bothered me was that he'd asked me to bring an umbrella.

If it was just for a consultation, there would be no need to force ourselves to go out on a rainy day, we could have just as easily talked in someone's room.

Shimazaki glanced around briefly before looking me straight in the eye.

“Today, I'm going to make you confess all of your secrets.”

"...Secrets?"

"Talking about it here won't help. For now, you'll understand if you just follow me."

With that, he stepped out of the lobby, immediately opened his umbrella, and started walking at a rather quick pace.

"What the heck? Where do you think he's going?" Yoshida said, squinting after him.

"Who knows. He did mention Keyaki Mall, but—"

After briefly exchanging a glance, we both followed after Shimazaki.

Part 1

Shimazaki, walking ahead of us, headed straight for Keyaki Mall. When we got to the entrance, he slipped his umbrella into the umbrella bag dispenser. After a soft click, he pulled it back out, the plastic bag now neatly wrapped around the umbrella. We followed suit, and entered the Mall right behind him. When we arrived in front of a bookstore, he finally turned to face us.

> **Translator's Note:** An umbrella bag dispenser (**傘袋スタンドに**) is a stand that provides plastic bags to cover wet umbrellas, preventing them from dripping water inside clean indoor spaces. It's not a stand where you leave your umbrella, instead you slip your umbrella into a bag so you can carry it with you without making a mess. Some are automatic, like the one shown here, while others are manual and require you to wrap the umbrella yourself.

"A bookstore? Are we making a detour?"

Without replying to Yoshida's murmur, Shimasaki stepped into the store and made a beeline for the *'gakusan'* section stacked with prep books and academic references.

> **Translator's Note:** **学参** (*gakusan*) is a shortened term for **学習参考書** (*gakushū sankōsho*), meaning academic study guides or reference books.

"This is where I wanted to bring you, Ayanokoji." he said firmly

It wasn't just a small detour, this was apparently the destination, the final stop.

"I want you to tell me what kinds of reference books you usually use and what your study routine is like."

Hearing those words, I finally began to see the nature of Shimazaki's consultation.

"So that's what this is about."

"Seeing the results of the last special exam, I understand that you're on a higher level than me. I don't expect to catch up to you overnight. But that doesn't mean I intend to stop chasing after you."

The slight glare he gave me when we talked about the cram school was likely due to an unconscious sense of rivalry.

He wanted to adopt a more efficient study style to get even a little closer to my academic ability. That strong determination was coming through clearly.

“C’mon, help him out, Ayanokoji.” Yoshida nudged.

Acting as the go-between, he urged me, but I didn't open my mouth. Or rather, it'd be more accurate to say I *couldn't*.

I was more than willing to grant his wish, but I didn't have the answer he was looking for. While most high school students were currently tackling and learning unknown subjects, I had completed that process in my childhood. The studying I was doing now wasn't learning, but complete revision, so I couldn't provide the answer he was hoping for.

“Hey, Ayanoko—”

“It's fine, Yoshida. As expected, he's probably not willing to teach me so easily.” Shimazaki said, furrowing his eyebrows at my silence.

“It's a study method you developed on your own. I don't expect you to teach it to me for free. If necessary, I can pay with private points, or if there's something else you want—”

I cut off Shimazaki, who was trying to start negotiations in hopes of learning my secret.

“If today's consultation was a problem I could solve, I would’ve gladly cooperated.”

“I *would’ve*, huh? Is it a trade secret when it comes to studying? Or do you need a bigger reward?”

“No, I don't need any reward. If Shimazaki's academic ability improves, it will naturally contribute to raising the class's overall level. I'll get my reward from that. Besides, it's not like I'll have any trouble no matter how much you improve your grades in the future.”

I tried to explain in a way he could understand as much as possible, but I knew it wouldn't be easy.

“I see. I understand the logic, for the most part. But the reason you still don't seem willing to teach me... Is it that you want to avoid me catching up to you at all costs?”

“That's not it either. If you think I’m just trying to protect my top spot, you're mistaken. I have no desire to show off or cling to being number one.”

In this school, there are definitely students who are better than me in various fields.

I want them to exist, they must exist.

If someone can surpass me in the field of academics, I'd like to see them do it.

“If you're going to say that much, then tell me what reference books you use. Also, I'd like you to tell me in detail about your usual study methods and how you manage your time.”

With the resolve to analyze everything about me, he asked without holding back.

“Of course, I will absolutely not blame you if it's not effective. I'll just accept that the method didn't suit me, so don't worry.” he remarked further.

His sincere attitude towards studying seemed genuine.

And riding that same wave of resolve, Yoshida steps up beside Shimazaki.

“Ah, could you tell me too? If I can study more efficiently, I'll copy it.”

What should I do?

The general study methods I taught Karuizawa, the way a normal student would teach a classmate, wouldn't work for high-level students like Shimazaki and Yoshida.

On the other hand, I couldn't possibly implement the full-fledged study method I'm currently considering, which incorporates the philosophy of nurturing White Room students.

Prepared to be met with suspicion, I chose to reveal just a sliver of the truth.

“Honestly, I don’t really use these kinds of reference books anymore.”

“...What? But you don't show up at the cram school either. You were solving problems that you haven't even been taught, not just the difficult ones. How do you explain that?”

“To be honest, a big part of it was just coincidence. I usually pick up knowledge from the internet. These days, there are video sites where people solve and explain difficult problems, right? I just happened to have seen a similar problem in a video I was watching, so I was able to solve it.”

“Well, I guess things like that might happen sometimes, but...”

It was precisely because Shimazaki was so sharp that my explanation made him even more skeptical. He trailed off, not looking convinced.

Despite his doubt, I made sure to emphasize that I didn't watch any specific sites or channels.

In the end, I would probably be perceived as a secretive person, but that couldn't be helped.

“However, there was a reference book that I felt was helpful.”

I often browse bookstores. In doing so, I've had the experience of skimming through several reference books to see what kind of information they contained and to what extent.

Relying on that memory, I could tell them which one I felt was most suitable for studying.

“If you're okay with that, I'd like to give you some advice.”

It’s not that I was refusing to teach entirely, I would tell them what I could, and I wanted them to use what seemed helpful. I made sure to clearly show that much intent.

The rest was up to Shimazaki and how he takes it.

Would he decide I was an annoying guy who wouldn't tell him the truth and leave it at that, or would he choose the option of moving forward for his own sake, even while having doubts about me?

With almost no time for hesitation, Shimazaki nodded in reply.

“Alright. I'll gladly accept your recommendation.”

It seemed he decided to start by trusting me, all for the sake of raising his own level.

In response to his request, I recommended a reference book that seemed good to me.

Both of them picked it up without hesitation, but Yoshida soon gave up on buying it. This was because, naturally, the information needed in a reference book varies greatly depending on the level and direction of the university one is aiming for.

Even if it was a fit for Shimazaki, who was aiming for a high level, it might be irrelevant to Yoshida.

So, after having a talk with Yoshida, Shimazaki and I searched for a reference book that we thought would suit him.

For about thirty minutes, we wandered around the study guide section, looking at various books, discussing back and forth, picking them up and tossing them back. Some of it might've seemed like pointless back-and-forth, but I didn't feel it was a bad time at all, rather, it was a fulfilling and fun time.

Bit by bit, we got a clearer idea of what Yoshida was looking for, and finally, we decided on the reference books he would buy.

Although it was nothing major, it gave a sense of accomplishment akin to working together to create something.

After that, the three of us split up for a moment to check out other books we might want, then circled back and met up again.

I found a few interesting magazines and novels, but since I didn't have any spare personal points, I decided to pass on all of them this time.

"What are those books?"

Shimazaki pointed out that Yoshida had returned holding a bunch of books in addition to the ones both of us had recommended.


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“Oh, these? Come on, I’m allowed to buy something besides textbooks, aren’t I?”

The books Yoshida was holding were men's fashion magazines and manga. There was one about appearance and clothing to be popular with the opposite sex, and another about conversational skills and techniques.

“Studying is important, sure, but I want to cherish love too. We’ve got less than a year of high school left, you know? I’m not gonna waste my last shot at dating a high school girl.”

Yoshida said that as the three of us headed for the register.

“I don't think it's necessarily the last chance, though…”

Shimazaki muttered, looking a bit taken aback, but he was certainly right.

Even as a college student or a working adult, the chance of dating a high school student isn’t necessarily zero. Then again, if the age gap is too big, that brings its own set of issues.

While I was seriously considering such things, the main reason was probably something else.

“Is it because you wouldn’t be able to see Shiraishi anymore?”

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say there was a condition attached: Until graduation from the Advanced Nurturing High School.

I only wanted to confirm my hunch, but upon hearing Shiraishi's name, Yoshida became extremely flustered and dropped one of the books he was holding.

“H-hey, Ayanokoji, don't say unnecessary things!”

He looked ready to cover my mouth, but the words that had already been spoken couldn't be taken back.

“I was just genuinely curious... was that out of line?”

“O-of course it was! I-it's not like I like Shiraishi or anything! I told you that before, didn't I!?”

Indeed, Yoshida himself had denied it, but his behavior had always said otherwise.

Even Shiraishi was certain that Yoshida had feelings for her.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that there’s a 99, no, a 100% chance he’s into her.

“...Shiraishi? You like Shiraishi...?”

Shimazaki, who had been walking a little ahead, turned back and muttered this as he watched Yoshida pick up the book.

“It's not like I like her or anything! I'm just a little interested, that's all...!” Yoshida frantically denied.

It wasn't unreasonable to think that his answer was similar to saying he *did* like her.

Shimazaki, unfazed by Yoshida’s blatant reaction, seemed to be the type who was entirely devoted to his studies, with little to no interest in things like romance.

Just as I was about to settle on that impression, his expression clouded over just for a moment.

I wonder if something’s on his mind.

“...Is that so...”

Noticing the sudden shift in Shimazaki’s demeanor to a slightly heavier one, Yoshida’s face turned pale. In an instant, a flurry of thoughts seemed to race through his mind, all converging down to a single conclusion.

“N-no way....don't tell me you're one of the 100 she's ‘slain’!?”

“Huh? The 100-slayer thing? Don’t be ridiculous.”

Shimazaki dismissed it with an exasperated sigh. His expression shifted right after, now clearly annoyed.

“Yoshida, do you really like Shiraishi?”

“I-I told you, it’s not like I *like* her! I’m just, you know, a little, just *a tiny bit* curious about her, that’s all!”

The more he tried to deny it, the more it sounded like he was saying '*I like her*.'

In fact, Shimazaki, watching all of this unfold, probably thought the same thing.

“Alright, fine, just listen up. That's just a rumor, don’t go on taking nonsense like that seriously.”

“W-Well, yeah, I get that but... You know what they say, 'where there's smoke, there's fire', right...?”

“It depends on how that fire was started. That was a lie Shiraishi intentionally spread herself.”

The '100-Man Slayer' nickname had always piqued my interest.

So when it was vehemently denied from a source I never expected, I couldn't help but be surprised.

Yoshida's shock and agitation, however, seemed to surpass mine, his voice caught in his throat as if frozen.

After a brief moment, as if his brain had processed it a little, he managed to croak out a question.

“Huh? A lie? H-How would you know something like that?”

Instead of answering right away, Shimazaki quietly scanned his surroundings. More cautiously than he had back in the lobby.

Fortunately, there didn't seem to be any other customers around, the store was quiet.

Once he was sure they were alone, Shimazaki returned to Yoshida, lowering his voice, and finally began to speak.

"Do you remember when you first started hearing that stupid rumor?"

"Um, If I recall correctly... I think it was around the summer of our first year.... Something about '20-Man Slayer' or whatever."

To reach a 100 people, it must have started with one.. Unless she had accomplished it before high school, it's only natural for the rumor to start from a smaller number.

Well, not that I have much room to talk, I wasn't too familiar with the nickname myself.

"To be precise, it was after the uninhabited island exam. That was when Shiraishi started getting close to Nishikawa. It was from the second semester onwards that such ridiculous stories suddenly started popping up."

Naturally, the circumstances of Class 1-A at that time were entirely unknown to me.

Yoshida recalled the events from back then, lightly tapping the corner of a magazine against his chin.

"Are you trying to imply that Nishikawa was the one who suggested spreading that rumor?"

"I don't have solid proof, but it's likely. Even if we assume the part about 20 people was true, the whole 100 people rumor is definitely a lie. There's just no way someone suddenly racks up 80 more people in this school to make it to 100, that's simply unrealistic. Anyone would realize that if they thought about it for a second."

I had, myself, first heard the "100-Man slayer" rumor from Nishikawa. Out of curiosity, I asked if the nickname would become 200 if the numbers increase, but the reply I got was ‘100 is enough to sound impressive.’

Perhaps she had started circulating 'slaying' rumors early on. 'This many or that' an uncertainty seeded and left to grow, until the nickname gradually took root.

But for what purpose?

That question naturally comes to mind.

“But… hey, can you really be that sure? I mean, what if the twenty in middle school part was actually true?”

Yoshida, on the other hand, appeared to be fixated on a different point and stepped toward Shimazaki, pressing him for answers.

“I don’t know anything about that. But even if it *was* true, so what? Does that somehow make it a problem for you to like Shiraishi?”

Shimazaki snapped back with a stern tone, like a teacher scolding a student, and Yoshida, visibly overwhelmed, stumbled back even farther than he had stepped forward.

“No… it’s not that… but still…”

“To begin with, I’m not even from the same middle school, so there’s no way I’d know that. But one thing I *can* say for sure is that the exaggerated rumors going around now are certainly false. I've been observing Shiraishi since day one, so there's no mistaking it.”

Immediately after declaring it, Shimazaki, as if realizing he had made a mistake, averted his gaze from us in a flustered manner.

Suddenly an awkward silence filled the already quiet bookstore.

“.....I observe all of my classmates, you see.”

Shimazaki added that belatedly, as if to deflect, but witnessing such an uncharacteristic display from him, it was impossible not to notice.

“You—”

Though I sensed the reason for Yoshida’s denial and the hidden circumstances behind it, he was likely hesitant to express it directly.

I could read from Yoshida's expression, the clash between his desire to confirm it and the rational part of him telling him not to.

“Don't misunderstand, Yoshida. ...It's not like that.”

“Misunderstanding? No, not really... I mean...if that's the case, then fine. It's not like I'm all that into Shiraishi either…”

Both of them exchanged words while deliberately avoiding each other’s gaze, facing entirely different directions as if the air between them had grown too dense to bear.

Still, it was obvious, both of them harbored strong feelings for Shiraishi, feelings they didn't hold for other girls. She herself seemed well aware of her popularity with the opposite sex, and this proved her confidence wasn't merely a bluff.

“Anyway, we're done in the bookstore. Let's head out, we're just holding up the place.”

Shimazaki said that, avoiding Yoshida's doubtful gaze.

Indeed, now that they've decided what to buy, lingering here and chatting would only be a nuisance to the store.

Besides, it would be best to avoid having other students overhear this kind of conversation.

“.....Yeah.”

We quickly settled the bill, then made our way out of the bookstore.

Part 2

I thought we'd go our separate ways after finishing picking out the reference books, but unexpectedly, at Shimazaki's suggestion, we ended up stopping by the rest area.

Perhaps neither of them wanted to leave things as they were, with the somewhat heavy atmosphere *still lingering around.*

I naturally thought and interpreted it that way, which is probably a sign that I've grown more attuned to emotions.

The 'atmosphere of a place' is hard to define, something intangible, something that can't be physically measured.

However, depending on whether you can read the expressions and tension in the room, your perception of that space can change completely.

In the end, the atmosphere exists only in each person's mind, shaped by how their brain interprets it.

Thinking back, there must have been many times since I enrolled that I failed to perceive the atmosphere and overlooked it.

Even at times when I believed I understood, it was, in truth, nothing more than superficial understanding. There were probably many things that I wasn't really sure about.

That was simply how shallow my understanding of this phenomenon called 'emotion' had always been, reflecting on how little direct experience I'd ever had with it.

But lately, things have begun to change.

I can clearly sense the emotions others carry, and not just through logic, but almost instinctively.

In fact, I've started recognizing them without even being aware of it.

After placing the books he had just bought onto the bench, Shimazaki started walking toward the vending machine.

“What would you like? It’s my treat, for helping me pick the reference books.”

With his back turned, still facing the vending machine, Shimazaki’s voice drifted over.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Besides, seeing you in the bookstore earlier, you're on a budget, right? I know you used your private points for that class transfer.”

Since he offered so generously, I decided to take him up on it without hesitation.

“You gonna treat me too?” Yoshida chimed in hopefully.

“You're paying for your own.”

“Stingy…”

Yoshida muttered under his breath. He stepped up to the vending machine next to Shimazaki’s, looking like he’d already resigned himself to his fate.

“To be honest, I’d have liked to treat you to something at a cafe, but it’s just too crowded today.” he said.

Perhaps because of the rain, students with time to kill on their day off were swarming the cafe.

When we passed by earlier, there was already a huge line waiting to get in. In that sense, for today at least, this place is probably better suited for a conversation.

He handed me a black canned coffee from the vending machine and I pulled the tab, hearing the gentle hiss as it opened.

For a moment, I fiddled with the pull-tab with my fingertips before gently pressing it in.

From the slightly dented rim of the aluminum can, a faint, roasted aroma slowly rose, curling into the air like an invisible thread of comfort.

“Black coffee, huh? You’ve got good taste.”

Shimazaki, who said that, also seemed to have the same canned coffee in his hand.

“Do you like it?” I asked

“If I’m being honest, not really. But it’s perfect when I need to concentrate. The stimulant effect is strong.” he replied with a casual shrug.

Apparently, it wasn’t about the flavor for him, it was the effect that mattered. He was clearly drinking it for its utility.

Meanwhile, Yoshida was still standing in front of the vending machine, groaning as if facing a life-altering decision.

“You're taking your time. If you don't need it, you don't have to force yourself to buy something you know?” Shimazaki called out.

Watching how Yoshida hadn’t even lifted a finger toward the buttons, Shimazaki couldn’t help but poke fun.

“Well, it's like, my throat's definitely dry. But I don't want to drink that much. At times like this, don't you get stuck deciding which one of these to buy?”

Saying that, Yoshida smoothly slid one step to the side of the vending machine and, turning to look at us, pointed to two products alternately. One was a 500ml tea, and the other was a 280ml tea, other than the size, they were the exact same product.

“The 280ml is plenty for me, but the price gap is 20 points. I can’t tell which one’s the smarter pick, it’s driving me nuts!”

This isn't just limited to drinks, the same can be said for many products on sale. Even when buying snacks, the large bag has more quantity and is cheaper, but it lacks the convenience of the smaller, individually wrapped packages.

“Normally, you’d wanna prioritize cost-performance. If it’s only a 20-point difference, you should just buy the 500ml without hesitation.”

Shimazaki answered instantly. He probably always does so himself.

“Well, yeah~ But I often end up not being able to finish it and having leftovers. Still, it's true that considering the cost-performance—”

“I would go with the 280ml one. If you're not confident you can finish it from the start. If you purchase the larger one and take home the remaining portion, the taste will degrade over time. Even though tea is said to have antibacterial properties, once you open and drink from a plastic bottle, bacteria from your mouth gets inside. You can't ignore the hygiene aspect either.”

“Ugh… y-you’re right. That’s true, those things do happen…” Yoshida muttered, clearly struggling with the logic.

I wondered if I’d said too much, but figured it was worth expressing my opinion. And just like that, Yoshida was back to indecisively staring at the vending machine.

In the end, the choice Yoshida made was to press both buttons at the same time.

The one that came out was the 500ml bottle. The look on Yoshida's face as he clutched the plastic bottle wasn't one of satisfaction, but rather one of self-questioning: *'Was this really the right choice?'*

Then again, he’d probably have worn the same expression if the 280ml one had come out instead.

By the time Yoshida, who had been so indecisive about his purchase, finished about a third of his tea on the spot, I noticed he kept glancing at Shimazaki, fidgeting restlessly, unable to sit still.

He probably wants to continue the conversation from the bookstore but can't bring himself to start it.

I decided it was time to break the silence.

“Shimazaki. About that rumor, the ‘hundred-person slayer’ one —”

I figured I should be the one to ask, so I did, straight to the point.

Yoshida immediately moved closer and sat down next to Shimazaki.

“You’re not seriously buying into that rumor too, are you, Ayanokoji?” Shimazaki asked, raising an eyebrow.

“When I first heard it from Nishikawa, I took it at face value, but listening to the story so far, some things don’t quite add up. Even though I was in a different class, with a nickname like that, it wouldn't be strange to have heard about it, yet I hadn't heard a single rumor about Shiraishi.”

“Is that... so? I guess it *did* seem like you didn’t know anything..., but still...” Yoshida said, trailing off.

Of course, it might just be that I was ignorant and uninterested in that sort of thing, but I had never even heard Shiraishi's name from another student before the nickname came up.

“But, if we assume everything Shimazaki is saying is true, why would they do something so half-assed?”

The idea of it being a pretext to keep the opposite sex away must have already occurred to Yoshida.

There are probably a certain number of people who would be disgusted by a long history of indulgence, but even so it wasn't a surefire deterrent, Yoshida himself, even after hearing the rumors, didn't seem to have lost interest in Shiraishi.

Furthermore, the fact that the rumor hadn't spread widely across classes or grades, as if it was intentionally kept in check, added an unsettling layer to the story.

"This is just my speculation but... I believe Nishikawa harbours special feelings for Shiraishi. I think that's what might have sparked these rumors. Don't you think she figured the '100-Man Slayer' rumor would be convenient for keeping boys at a distance? While there are certainly some guys who'd be thrilled by a rumor like that, thinking she's an easy woman, but it's more likely to make her an object of disgust, wouldn't you say?"

Shimazaki presented his theory as a possible answer to the questions we had.

For a moment, Yoshida looked awkward, but I didn't press the issue, that would have been tactless.

".....What are you talking about, Nishikawa's a girl."

"Yeah, but it's not like love has to follow gender anymore." Shimazaki replied calmly.

"Well, maybe that's true... But still, Shiraishi doesn't have anything to gain from this, does she?"

"I wouldn't be so sure." Shimazaki shrugged. "Shiraishi has no intention of dating boys right now, so she might have gone along with the proposal, understanding Nishikawa's intentions, as a way to keep boys at a distance."

After draining the last sip of his canned coffee, Shimazaki gave a thoughtful nod.

They couldn't be certain just yet, but it was reasonable to consider that possibility.

“Still… don’t you think that’s going too far?” Yoshida finally said. “Just to avoid dating boys, isn't it rough being thought of as an easy woman by everyone around you?”

“I agree,” Shimazaki replied. “Which brings us to another theory.”

Yoshida, who hadn’t quite gotten there yet, looked puzzled as Shimazaki went on.

“Maybe Shiraishi was never into guys in the first place. Just like Nishikawa, maybe she’s attracted to the same sex. That would explain why she didn’t mind a rumor that made her unpopular with boys, it simply didn’t matter to her.”

“Wh- N-No way...!” Yoshida's voice trembled with disbelief.

It's an idea that allows her to accomplish both: *Appropriately keeping boys away while accepting affection from girls.*

Whether Nishikawa knew Shiraishi's preferences or not remained uncertain, but the possibility couldn’t be dismissed.

When Shimazaki blurted out about him observing Shiraishi since day one, maybe he wasn’t exaggerating after all.

However, at the same time, the flaws in that theory are also noticeable. I heard this '100-Man Slayer' rumor from Nishikawa's mouth. I haven't been told about the nickname by Shiraishi herself. That's not to say that the rumor is being spread without her knowledge, though.

As long as it's being whispered about within the class, it's bound to reach her ears sooner or later.

If it started from the first-year uninhabited island exam, then the probability is almost 100%.

And even if Shiraishi likes the same sex, that rumor, while serving to keep the opposite sex away, also carries the risk of her being avoided by other girls. If everyone assumed she liked boys, then even girls might hesitate to get too close.

“Like I said, though,” Shimazaki added, his tone more subdued, “this is all just speculation. There's no guarantee that anything besides the lie about the 100 people is true, no, even that. It's just me watching and coming to that conclusion on my own. If you don’t believe it, you can just find out for yourself.”

Having finished talking, he took a breath, as if his heightened feelings had calmed down a little.

Shimazaki stood up, tossed the empty can of coffee into the trash, and returned back.

“Hey, why are you tellin' me all this in so much detail?”

“Do you want to know the reason?”

“Nah... it's like, I wanna know, but I also don't.”

“You can rest assured, Yoshida. I was planning to tell you even if you didn't ask.”

With that, Shimazaki stepped forward, not in front of Yoshida, but me.

“This study guide was a great help. But there are still many more things I want you to teach me. I figured if I lent you a hand here, Ayanokoji might open up to me someday.”

Apparently, what was important to Shimazaki wasn't Shiraishi or Yoshida's true feelings.

More than those things, it seems he wants to prioritize the efficiency of his studies right now.

“You can tell me now, you know?” he prompted again.

I shook my head.

“Sorry, but aside from what I already said, I haven’t done anything special.”

When I gave the same response again, Shimazaki let out a sigh.

“You said you looked things up online and watched videos, right? Sorry, but a perfect score can’t be explained with such an ordinary approach.”

“I told you,” I replied, “coincidence played a big role. I just enjoy digging into things most people don’t bother with. Like, I often end up researching stuff we’ll study next year or even in college. I guess I just have that habit.”

I paused, then added, “So that's how I happened to already know... how to solve the problems that appeared on the test. That’s all there is to it.”

As I rattled off excuses in quick succession, Shimazaki pressed his lips tightly, clearly displeased. But perhaps realizing how rigid he looked, he quickly relaxed and exhaled softly.

“Well... I guess not everything can be handed over so easily.”

Without pressing me further, Shimazaki seemed to drop the pursuit, at least for now.

His sharp understanding and lack of unnecessary stubbornness made him a surprisingly easy person to talk to.

“But information is still information,” he added. “Someday, I’ll have you repay me in kind.”

Since it's a debt that can't be settled with money, it seems like it will be difficult for me to repay, but I had no room to argue.

This whole exchange, I realized, hadn’t just lifted the emotional weight off the lovelorn Yoshida, it also undoubtedly proved to be a meaningful conversation for me, who had doubts about Shiraishi's true intentions.

Part 3

A little while later, Shimazaki left ahead of us, saying he needed to study.

Yoshida, meanwhile, stayed seated on the bench, his back hunched over as he clutched the now half-full bottle of tea tightly in both hands.

His mind seemed adrift, as if still struggling to sort out his feelings. In hindsight, maybe the 280ml bottle had been the right choice after all.

“It’s probably time we head back. Looks like the weather’s only going to get worse,” I said gently.

If the rain got any heavier, even an umbrella wouldn’t stop my pants from getting soaked.

He didn’t respond. His eyes were distant, lost somewhere far beyond the falling rain. I stayed close, quietly watching over him for a while. Just as I was about to speak again, his hunched shoulders slowly uncurled.

“.....Yeah, you're right.....”

He gave a listless reply, then sluggishly got to his feet and started walking.

“You forgot your book.”

When I handed him the book in the paper bag that had been placed on the bench, he took it with another listless reply. He must really be bothered by what we talked about earlier.

“What am I supposed to do if Shiraishi likes girls... I'm a guy, *a guy*, you know.”

“That hasn’t even been confirmed yet,”

“But still…”

“If you're already shaken just by this, maybe it's best to stop having feelings for Shiraishi. It could turn out that the 100-slayer rumor is true, or she likes the same sex, and then something else, something Yoshida doesn’t want. Don’t you think?”

That's not something limited to just Shiraishi's case. It could be anyone. The deeper you try to know about someone, the more chances there are of stumbling across things you'd never imagined. You’ll face that kind of reality again and again throughout your life. If you're not prepared for that yet, then retreating is also a form of courage.

“...Something I don't want, huh.”

Whether it was due to the shock, or because he had finally admitted to liking Shiraishi, he no longer showed any signs of disagreement.

“I... yeah, that's right... Who cares about the 100-Man slayer thing, or if she likes girls, I gotta accept that otherwise I won’t be able to move forward.”

To open up possibilities, one must walk a thorny path.

As Yoshida's arms tensed and he hugged the book tightly, a faint light began to return to his once dim eyes.

“Alright— I'm gonna...!”

“Rather than worrying about the past, the thing you should be more concerned about right now is Shimazaki liking Shiraishi. That's an undeniable truth.”

“Guhah!”

Just as Yoshida was getting himself fired up again, he dramatically clutched his chest and pretended to spit blood, expressing the damage he had just taken.

“Oi, Ayanokoji, are you tryin' to cheer me up or get me down! Which is it!?”

“I think the timing was bad, but I just thought I'd inform you of the current situation. It's neither of those.”

“Neither!? That’s just cruel, man!”

Now that he mentions it, that's certainly true.

“I want to cheer you up.”

“Don't say it like it's an afterthought. ...You really are that kind of guy, aren't you.”

Yoshida replied, half-joking but not without a tinge of truth. Just as I’d been analyzing him all this time, it seemed he’d been doing the same with me.

“But really, that's the reality, huh. I can't believe Shimazaki turned out to be my rival... haah.” he muttered with a long sigh.

Perhaps because there was no one around once we exited Keyaki Mall, Yoshida said it aloud again. He probably just couldn't help but let it out.

As we started walking, the rain quickly intensified, drumming a steady rhythm against our umbrellas.

“Do you hate that Shimazaki is your rival?”

“Of course I do. With this kind of rival, the fewer the better. Shiraishi's already popular as it is. Thanks to those rumors, not many are bold enough to go after her in the open, but if it ever turns out those rumors are fake, you can bet everyone will come swarming in.”

And if that happened, Shimazaki wouldn’t even be the biggest threat anymore.

“Even so,” I added, “it didn’t look like Shimazaki had any plans to confess his feelings to her just yet.”

From the sidelines, just watching her seemed to be enough for him. Depending on how you look at it, you could say he doesn't have the courage to develop it into a romance, but that depends on how much weight he decides it holds for his future.

Shimazaki, despite his excellent academic performance, never let it get to his head. He kept studying even on holidays, determined to produce results, however small. From that alone, it was easy to see just how demanding his target school must be. And that's why, without a doubt, romance wasn't something he could afford to prioritize right now.

Even so, the sudden appearance of a rival was enough to rattle anyone who **did** prioritize love.

"There could be a sudden change of heart, you know... If I start making a blatant move on Shiraishi, the feelings he's been holding back might just explode. Am I wrong?"

"That might be true."

Perhaps because he had already admitted his feelings in front of me and Shimazaki, Yoshida no longer seemed interested in hiding his true thoughts.

Romantic feelings aren't something you can easily control. Even if I hadn't truly felt their core, I understood them in principle.

"Just to be sure... you're not going to say you're aiming for Shiraishi too, right?"

"I believe I've already denied that once." I replied

"But what if the rumors turn out to be false?" Yoshida shot back. "Then you might jump into the fray too. And maybe, I dunno, your feelings shift, your heart drifts. You *do* sit next to her after all."

He was relentless, determined to squeeze a verbal commitment out of me.

“I don’t know if just saying this will reassure you or not,” I said calmly, “but... don’t worry. It’s not going to happen.”

At this point in time, I held no feelings toward Shiraishi beyond those of a mere classmate.

Yoshida, who had been looking at me as if trying to gauge my true intentions, soon nodded, showing a certain level of acceptance. Perhaps that was the only way he could process it, by convincing himself to accept it.

“Well, Karuizawa, the one you used to date, is a completely different type from her,” he added. “I don’t mean that in a bad way. Karuizawa’s definitely cute.”

Many guys tend to view Karuizawa as just another 'gyaru' or a flighty girl, but that’s far from the truth. She has a side to her that contradicts those assumptions, and she’s not the kind of girl most people imagine. Even so, what Yoshida said just now only served to confirm what many already thought, her looks alone were enough to stir envy in anyone nearby.

“I know what you're trying to say.”

Just as people have likes and dislikes when it comes to food, there are preferences, big and small, for romantic partners.

In truth, Shiraishi and Karuizawa aren't even in the same category, they’re fundamentally different types.

That alone seemed to offer Yoshida a bit of reassurance.

Even so, it seemed more than mere coincidence that both Shimazaki and Yoshida, who I had grown close to, harbored feelings for Shiraishi. Maybe even a good number of their classmates are secretly harboring feelings for her, whether they realize it or not.

“One thing I don't understand is, is Shiraishi actually a popular student with the opposite sex? Well, I'll admit her appearance is superior and gathers more attention than the average female student, but—”

There may be only a handful of girls like her across the entire grade, but it wouldn’t be wrong to say they exist.

“She's undeniably cute. And also.....”

“And also?”

He seemed to imply that her appeal went beyond just her looks. But whether it was embarrassment or just a desire not to say more, he left it hanging there.

“Mind if I ask what exactly it is that draws you to her?”

Seeking an answer, I decided to press him a little further.

“Eh? Well... it's like...”

Yoshida looked slightly embarrassed, but still managed to continue.

“How should I put it... it's that mysterious part of her, you know, that's what's nice.”

Mysterious. That was actually a pretty spot-on description.

I, too, had always felt that Shiraishi's thoughts were hard to pin down, somehow elusive.

And hearing Shimazaki confidently assert that the whole ‘100-man-slayer’ nickname being a lie, only deepened that impression.

“Mysterious, huh? I think I get what you're saying, but when it comes to being mysterious, don’t you think Morishita is on a higher level?”

When I asked if she was also a potential romantic interest in the same way, Yoshida immediately raised the corners of his eyes.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ayanokoji,” he snapped. “Morishita isn’t mysterious, she’s just an incomprehensible weirdo. You got eraser bits thrown at you from behind too, didn’t you? That’s what I mean. Total little devil behavior. Don’t ever lump her in with Shiraishi. She’s quite kind, you know?”

Yoshida’s voice carried a force behind it, the kind that only someone with personal scars could speak with. He must’ve been another victim of Morishita’s odd antics. Judging by how closely he had been observing Shiraishi, it was clear he had witnessed me in that moment.

“Sorry. I take that back,” I said honestly, offering an immediate apology. I knew I had made a mistake by comparing the two, and I felt the need to correct it right away.

“.....As long as you understand. Hey, don't tell me you have a thing for Morishita?”

“How did you arrive at that conclusion?”

“Well, I thought it was weird when she said she wanted you in the seat in front of her. Plus, she never hangs out with anyone, but she talks to you an awful lot. She'd be cute if she didn't talk, right? It's a rare case where her looks are canceled out by her personality.”

Whether that “cancellation” really works is... well, debatable.

It's probably best to stop meddling with this any further. She wouldn't appreciate being discussed so freely, behind her back.

“Sorry to disappoint, but that’s not it,” I replied flatly. “If anything, she’s more cautious around me than anyone else. She’s the one who’s most suspicious about whether I actually want to help the class.”

It would be fair to say she's the furthest thing from a potential romantic interest.

“So that's why she's keeping you close. What you said was true, then.”

“I'm having a hard time with her saying all sorts of things, true or not, from behind me every day.”

It’s like I’ve been cursed by something unpleasant, that’s probably the best way to describe it.

“I see. At this rate, it doesn't seem like Morishita will become a romantic interest for you. And if she ever did fall for someone, they’d have to be a complete weirdo themselves. Besides, you're popular enough without having to bother with someone like Morishita. ...Honestly, I'm super envious.”

“Am I popular?”

“Don't say it in such a damn irritating way. You’re good-looking, smarter than Shimazaki, athletic too, and on top of that, you went from Class A to Class C and ended up becoming a leader, you know? A normal girl wouldn't leave you alone.”

So that's what being 'popular' means. Apparently, that's how I came across to those around me.

A traitor to my class, a coward who hid his abilities.

I've done nothing but things that would make me disliked regardless of gender, but it seems that impression has faded for the students of Class C who have become my allies.

“Man, I really wanna go out with Shiraishi!”

Unable to contain his emotions any longer, he shouted, letting his feelings explode.

“Shiraishi is right be—”

“Eh, no way!”

Yoshida shouted, flinging his umbrella into the air as he leapt in shock.

In his panic, he even let go of his book, but I managed to catch it just before it hit the ground.

“—hind you. If it were the case what would you do? Is what I was about to ask.”

“What kind of feint is that!? I’m getting soaked!”

He scrambled to pick up his umbrella, but by then, raindrops had already splattered across his entire hoodie.

“Well, something like that will dry off quickly.”

“Easy for you to say!” Yoshida snapped, still dripping.

I handed back the book and we resumed walking.

Yoshida's face morphed with every passing moment, joy, anger, sorrow, and laughter all played out without a hint of restraint. That openness, all of it, stemmed from one undeniable root: romantic feelings.

It’s a fact that even he acknowledges without hesitation, he’s seriously in love with Shiraishi. It’s written all over him, and no one would doubt it.

I, on the other hand, still don’t understand that emotion in its true essence.

I started dating Karuizawa to learn about '*romantic feelings*', but we broke up without me ever truly knowing them.

All I gained was the framework of a boy-girl relationship, without ever grasping the emotion itself.

To fall in love with someone.

To come to hate someone.

In truth, I still don’t fully understand either.

If not for my goal of maintaining balance between the four classes, maybe I could’ve spent another year chasing that answer.

Just maybe, I would've been able to see Karuizawa through the lens of genuine romantic feelings.

But that ship has long since sailed. It's nothing more than a useless fantasy now.

Looking at Yoshida, who had spoken so seriously, I decided to just try saying what I was thinking.

"You said you envy me, but honestly, I actually envy you, Yoshida."

"Eh? Me? Why?" Yoshida blinked, visibly thrown off.

"You can openly say that you like Shiraishi. No... the fact that you can even *feel* something like that, I honestly envy you for it."

Unlike problems that can be broken down into mathematical formulas, love isn't something logic can dissect. And yet, Yoshida could surrender himself to such unquantifiable emotions so naturally.

He flailed, trying to wave it all away. "N-no, come on! It's not like that... It's just... it's just a stupid one-sided crush, okay?"

He was trying to deny it again, but maybe realizing there was no point in pretending anymore, he let out a deep breath and spoke more calmly.

"There's nothing to be envious of. You're just messing with me, right? That's what this is?"

He laughed, but there was a flicker of real frustration in his eyes. It wasn't all just a joke to him.

However, I, too, wasn't messing around, I meant what I said.

“It’s not sarcasm,” I told him. “I still don’t understand what it really means to fall in love. To like someone seriously. To want that love to succeed, to be afraid of rejection, or fear being disliked... or even the opposite— falling out of love, wanting to break up. I haven’t been able to grasp those kinds of emotions, whether they’re positive or negative.”

“What the hell?” Yoshida said, frowning. “Doesn’t seem like you’re messing around... but seriously? Weren’t you actually dating Karuizawa? And for quite a while, too?”

He wasn’t wrong, he was throwing a truth I couldn’t deny right back at me.

“...It’s fine, just forget it.”

Even if I put my state of mind into words, it's a story the other person can't possibly understand.

From Yoshida’s perspective, I’m simply the guy who dated Karuizawa. It’s only natural he’d assume I’ve experienced everything love has to offer.

However, seeing my words and attitude, he seemed to have sensed something, even if he didn't fully understand it.

“...Well, I guess pushing any further would just feel nosy, so I’ll stop here,” he said, breaking the silence.

But after a moment’s pause, Yoshida, who still seemed to have something he wanted to confirm, peeked at my face and asked.

“Then, you don’t have anyone you like right now?”

“I don't.”

“I see, so there *are* guys like that.”

“That's why I'm envious. Of being able to truly fall in love with someone.”

“.....I hope you find someone too, a girl you can truly fall in love with.”

A member of the opposite sex I can truly fall in love with.

Perhaps I'd already come close, through my time with Karuizawa, and that strange, unfathomable bond with Ichinose that no one else would likely understand.

Feeling that someone is beautiful. Adorable.

Touching someone of the opposite sex, feeling your heartbeat rise with every passing moment.

I have gone through those kinds of experiences to some extent.

However, romantic feelings have still not sprouted within me.

Or maybe they have, and I just haven’t noticed yet.

Our casual chat, shared while watching the rain fall, naturally came to a pause.

“Anyway, let’s head back, Ayanokoji. Looks like the rain’s gonna get even heavier,” Yoshida says.

That’s exactly what I said earlier... but I’ll spare him the jab.

I pushed my feet forward again, resuming my stride.

It was a short time, but by talking with Yoshida and Shimazaki, I was able to get a general grasp of their personalities.

For better or worse, neither of them puts on a facade. They’re both the kind to speak their minds openly.

On the surface, Yoshida is stricter with people, but on the inside, he's quite caring. Shimazaki, on the other hand, maintains a healthy distance with everyone, neither too close nor too aloof, always interacting from a balanced, fair place.

Along the way, I also gained insight into their personal struggles with love.

As far as understanding them as classmates goes, I'd say my analysis is complete.

Both are indispensable to the class and will continue to function as valuable contributors in the future, and should problems arise, I'll need to be there to support and protect them.

And so, as the rain began to fall harder, the two of us walked in silence and returned back to the dorms.

Chapter 2: A Rule-less Exam

❖

> **Translator's Note:** We opted for a creative liberty with "The Rule-less Exam", deviating slightly from the literal translation of 「穏やかな試験」, which more accurately means "A Calm Exam" or "An Easygoing Exam." This choice was made to better capture the nuance and thematic intent of the contents, even if it diverges from the direct translation.

It was a Thursday, already past the midpoint of May.

Among the third-year high school students, some had begun studying at a pace far beyond what they had shown last year. Shimazaki, who I'd gone to the bookstore with the other day, was one of them.

But it was hardly surprising. This was the time when students began to seriously consider which university they wanted to attend and what field they wanted to pursue.

And studies were only the beginning. It would also be important to request university brochures and gather information for open campuses.

Normally, students enrolled at this school had very limited chances to go outside the premises, but during summer break, third-years were permitted to attend open campuses, provided they submitted the proper applications.

There, they could sit in on mock lectures, receive admissions guidance, talk one-on-one with advisors, and participate in trial experiences such as bootcamps.

Feeling the atmosphere of the place firsthand and sensing whether it's a good fit, things no pamphlet or website could ever fully communicate, was an essential part of the process.

And this wasn't limited to just those aiming for university.

Students hoping to join the workforce had their own set of preparations to make: company orientation sessions, workplace tours, internships, and more.

As summer approached, the pressure to prepare for life after graduation began to mount from every possible angle.

The majority of students typically had to decide between higher education and entering the workforce at this juncture, though exceptions were always present.

Some already had their futures decided for them due to various other reasons, such as taking over a family business, or to become part-time workers by choice.

Others simply couldn't decide yet, leaving their future up in the air until the very last moment.

But regardless of the path, one thing was certain: things have become overwhelmingly busier compared to the last two years.

As the homeroom droned on, I heard a soft voice from behind.

"Getting used to the class yet?"

It was Morishita, her voice casual but probing.

"More or less," I replied, not turning around.

"More or less, huh? If you're just acting tough, it's okay to be honest, you know?"

"I'm not acting tough."

"Are you sure? Perhaps you should treat me like a priest and confess to what weighs down your soul."

I wasn't putting on a brave face at all, but I wonder why she was so concerned.

"Could it be that you're... worried about me?"

Caught off guard, I turned slightly to look at her. Maybe that sudden question was just her own awkward way of showing concern.

“Exactly,” she said with a smirk. “I was planning to laugh hysterically if you told me you hadn’t fit in.”

“That's not 'exactly' at all. You don’t seem even a slightest bit worried.”

Apparently, she just wanted to make fun of me.

I regretted even turning around to look.

“Eh? did you want me to be worried about you?” she teased.

“Not at all.”

I meant it sincerely, but Morishita didn’t believe me, on the contrary, her suspicion only deepened.

“Oh dear, putting on such a brave face. This is exactly why people with names that start with 'A', end with 'Ka', and are 10 characters long in hiragana are hopeless. The statistics totally make sense.”

> **Translator’s Note:** This is a very specific jab at Ayanokoji. His full name in hiragana is **あやのこうじきよたか** (*a-ya-no-ko-u-ji-ki-yo-ta-ka*), which is exactly 10 characters.

That’s... a statistical sample size of one. How oddly specific could you get?

Since it's homeroom, it's probably best not to engage with her any further.

“Did you just think it's best not to engage with me right now?”

“...I won't deny it.”

I decided to ignore the student behind me and faced forward again.

“—Starting from tomorrow, a new Exam will begin,” Mashima-sensei announced just as homeroom was about to end.

A wave of mild confusion spread across the room.

The suddenness of '*starting tomorrow*,' combined with homeroom being only a minute or two from dismissal, created an odd timing.

Despite the school's usual procedure, something about how today's announcement was brought up felt off.

Normally, things like Special Exams, which tend to require lengthy explanations, are introduced with ample time left in the homeroom.

Does he intend to continue talking even after we've entered the break time?

No, in the first place... Was the way Mashima-sensei just phrased that *a coincidence*?

While a certain phrasing caught my attention, I decided to wait for him to continue.

"The rewards are as follows," Mashima-sensei began. "The class that ranks 1st will receive +50 class points, 2nd place will receive +20, 3rd place will have no change, and the 4th placing class will end up losing 25 respectively. The announcement of the details, including how the rewards will be handled in an unlikely event of a tie, will be in one week from now. Until then, strive to act in a manner befitting a student. Furthermore, this time, we'll not be accepting any questions whatsoever."

Without displaying any rules or rewards on the monitor, he finished his explanation with just plain words.

With a final "That's all," the bell rang.

And just like that, without offering any further clarification, Mashima-sensei walked out of the room.

Though brief, the announcement left a lasting impression with several points of concern.

Phrases that could be taken two ways… that remark about ‘student-like behavior’… and then—

The class fell silent for a moment, until Hashimoto scraped back his chair and rose.

“This school seems to like pushing one troublesome thing after another on us. So, what's the plan, leader? Do we start the discussion right away?”

As if to ensure the discussion would proceed smoothly, Hashimoto said that and looked at me as he turned around.

“If possible, I’d like to begin by hearing everyone else’s thoughts. I’ll organize the information and share my own perspective later.”

When I addressed the class, Hashimoto let out a small laugh.

“Oops, my bad, didn't mean to laugh in a weird way. It's just, this feels like the total opposite of when Sakayanagi was our leader. She often made decisions on her own without asking anyone for their input, you see.”

Sakayanagi preferred to reflect alone on the essence of every affair.

I suppose in some ways, I’m no different.

But right now, I’m in the midst of gathering intel from the class. I want to pay attention to what kind of remarks others will make during the discussion.

For a brief moment, the room was wrapped in silence, until Sanada decided to speak up.

“The teacher not touching on the contents of the exam at all is quite natural, but this time it was different. The only things revealed were the rewards and that it starts in a week from now—”

As we mulled over Mashima-sensei’s cryptic words, Tamiya raised her hand as if to follow up.

Barely five seconds into the discussion, just a few words were enough to set things in motion.

“Wait. I thought the exam period *is* the upcoming week,” she said.

Despite the limited amount of information received, it was quickly evident that our interpretations were already diverging.

“I agree with Tamiya. I took it as the exam period starts tomorrow, and the results will be announced a week later”.

In agreement, the one to voice her thoughts was Shimizu, who joined the discussion without hesitation.

“Really? Didn’t Mashima-sensei say the details would be revealed *in a week*? Doesn’t that mean this coming week is the preparation period?” she argued, offering a calm but contrasting view.

Soon after, Motodoi raised her hand and countered Shimizu’s reasoning with a thoughtful perspective.

The two phrases in Mashima-sensei’s earlier statements: ‘*Starting from tomorrow, a new Exam will begin*’ and '*Announcement of details will be in one week*', both seemed relevant to the timeline, yet each gave a different impression.

If you take only the former at face value, the exam starts tomorrow.

Conversely, if you take only the latter at face value, the details will be given in one week, and the exam will then be held.

It was phrased in a way that interpretations could subtly differ depending on the listener.

“I see, it's true that Mashima-sensei’s words *could* be interpreted in either ways.”

Sanada took charge smoothly.

"Well then, let's first take a quick poll. Who believes this coming week is the *preparation phase*, with the special exam happening *after* one week?"

Nineteen hands shot up, more than half the class.

"And now, who thinks the exam *starts tomorrow*, with the announcement of details and results to follow a week later?"

Only twelve students raised their hands this time.

Those who didn't raise their hands for either option likely couldn't make a decision or simply didn't want to commit to a stance.

Since this wasn't something that could be resolved by a majority vote, Sanada didn't pursue it further.

Shimazaki then casually raised his hand, he was among those who believed that the upcoming week was meant as preparation time for the exam.

"What seems clear right now," he began, "is that the rules aren't going to be overly complex. The fact that they haven't bothered to explain anything backs that up. And the potential reward fluctuations don't seem major either. Since the school will be overseeing the whole thing, we're probably going to compete in a visible, straightforward manner, maybe even just based on test scores. The mention of '*student-like behavior*' also led me to believe he might be referring to studying, the primary duty of a student."

It was evident that Shimazaki had been listening closely to Mashima-sensei. He'd picked up on that particular phrase "student-like behavior", and fixated on it as the key.

"Another test? Right after the last one?" Hashimoto grumbled, clearly skeptical. He was still recovering from the recent '*Whole-Class and Minority Comprehensive Academic Test*' a more rule-heavy exam. The idea of jumping straight into another written exam left him doubtful.

Shimazaki, however, wasn't imagining some elaborate challenge, rather just a plain test weighted on the basis of average or total class scores. Still, Hashimoto's concern was valid. Would they really hit students with two back-to-back written tests?

"It does feel strange when you think about it that way," Shimazaki admitted, "but on the other hand, it seems totally plausible, doesn't it? If you interpret it as studying isn't something you do because you're told to, but something you do properly without someone needing to tell you, then the lack of rules is understandable. The possibility of competing with a pop quiz……yeah, that might be it."

Tsukaji, a female student listening next to Shimazaki nodded quietly, seemingly in agreement with the idea.

If a test were to be suddenly held in a week, that was certainly a strong possibility.

However, the expression '*pop quiz*' also contains a contradiction. After all, the whole point of a pop quiz is that it comes without warning. If they'd already been told that some kind of test was coming, the element of surprise, and therefore the meaning, would be lost.

Even so, that doesn't mean a written test is off the table, and that's what makes it complicated. With no details on what subject or how difficult it might be, students are forced to choose: cast a wide net in their studying, or gamble on a narrow focus. They must weigh their options and prioritize subjects themselves. In such a setup, sheer academic ability may not be the only deciding factor. If someone makes the right call, even a class like Ryuen's, which is usually seen as academically weak, could stand a chance of winning by luck and insight alone.

Although opinions in the room were clearly split into two camps, no one was trying to stubbornly push their viewpoint onto others.

What united them was the simple desire to win. That shared goal drove them to contribute ideas freely and gather materials to build a path forward, so no one would walk away with regrets.

At this point, it was impossible to determine for certain which direction was correct, so the discussion continued.

Watching them genuinely try to decipher what little Mashima-sensei had said, with a forward-looking attitude doing their best to stay positive, was something worth admiring.

This *rule-less* exam, for all its ambiguity, undoubtedly carries a deliberate purpose: to test just how long one can sustain a sense of tension.

People can brace themselves and be on high alert against a danger they can see. But chasing after a vague, abstract goal suspended in uncertainty is a different matter entirely. Sustaining tension in such a fog for prolonged time is not an easy feat.

In addition to not knowing whether the test would span a week or take place a week later, even its contents remained a complete mystery..

Thus, the students were compelled to establish "provisional" goals, temporary targets to keep moving, to avoid stagnation. The very discussion they were having was their way of crafting a compass in this fog, a signpost to keep progressing. Just engaging in this conversation was, in itself, a valuable chance for growth.

“I get the point,” said Shimazaki, his voice cutting through the lingering indecision. “But preparing for this week and preparing for next week are entirely different strategies. We should make a decisive call and choose a path.”

With recess half over, Shimazaki, unwilling to let the discussion stall any longer, proposed we decide on a clear policy.

“What do you think, Ayanokoji? Isn’t it time you gave us your answer?”

Recognizing that the moment called for leadership, Shimazaki turned to me, not just personally, but on behalf of the entire class.

“My opinion is mostly the same as what's been brought up. The fact that the school deliberately didn't explain the rules this time means... it must be something that can be understood and established without an explanation. Also, considering the relatively short span of one week, written or physical exam, the extensions of our usual class activities, are of course valid candidates.”

“So, you're saying you, like me, see the special exam as taking place one week from now?”

“No, I’m just not ruling out any possibility. It's entirely conceivable that the exam will begin unofficially tomorrow. For example, the exam might be to present the conclusion we've drawn through this discussion and debate.”

I answered while retracing the flow of everyone’s thoughts, and blending my own insight along the way.

“...So, what we prepared for, that’s what the school plans to check after a week?”

“Yes. Maybe one class focused on studying, thinking it would be a written test. Another might’ve trained physically, expecting something athletic. Some might’ve taken a balanced approach, composite of both. Any of those could become the basis for evaluation.”

“I see...?”

Even so, it's unlikely that any student was confident enough to stamp their seal of approval on it.

The important thing was to expand the view and acknowledge that, while limited, there were still many possibilities.

“Many ideas were brought up,” I continued, “but one I feel is highly probable that, starting tomorrow, what’s really being evaluated is the behavior in our daily lifestyle”.

In everyday life, there are all kinds of themed campaigns, such as Anti-Delinquency Week, Disaster Prevention Week, Reading Week, Greeting Campaign Month, Traffic Safety Month, Compassion Month. If you tried, you could list many more.

“Lifestyle...? That's something I didn’t think of...”

Sanada, who had remained silent for most of the discussion, murmured the words with a hint of surprise, his hand resting on his chin.

He seemed puzzled by the idea that this could be a likely outcome.

“So you’re saying it’s something similar to what happened back in our first year?”

“That's right. Back then, it lasted a month, but it wasn’t even announced as a test beforehand. As a result, the former Class D that I was in suffered a major defeat, losing all of its class points—.”

“But this time,” I continued, “it’s like the school is assuming all four classes have caught on. And now it’s testing whether we can lead a clean, proper school life based on that awareness. Even if the ‘Lifestyle behavior’ is unrelated to this exam, just keeping this in the back of our minds has great significance.”

“I see. ‘Lifestyle behavior’ refers to everyday actions that aren't bound by specific rules. It's a matter of course that we should take classes seriously, avoid being late or absent as much as possible, and be prudent in our actions before and after school.”

Since it didn’t require any extra effort or time, there's no harm in including it as a candidate strategy.

“Still, if every class starts displaying careful behavior, then the bar for evaluation will get just as much stricter. We'll be required to exhibit exemplary behavior not just when we're on campus, but also outside, all the way to Keyaki Mall and the school commute routes.”

The difference between victory and defeat might come down to a truly small margin.

Walking past a single piece of litter without picking it up. Even something like that could lead to a one-point deduction and, consequently, defeat.

“I was kind of thinking the test might involve our personal lives too.” said Nishikawa, her voice slightly reserved. “That's how I interpreted sensei’s words about striving to act in a manner befitting a student.”

Her words seemed to echo a shared sentiment. A few students, who had ideas but hadn’t voiced them, nodded in agreement.

Yet, this alone wasn’t enough to be conclusive. There were still too many missing pieces.

Notably, no one brought up the words of Mashima-sensei. He never said “Special exam”, only “Exam.” And it wasn’t the first time.

During the month-long lifestyle behavior observation after enrollment, they never officially called it a special exam either. Chabashira-sensei too had a history of omitting that word during past events like first-year sports festival.

However, the possibility that it was just an omission of a word couldn’t be dismissed. Which is why I figured it wouldn’t hurt to gather more information first.

“There's no need to be certain. The assumption that some kind of test might be coming by the end of this week still stands, spending this time building on that premise is also something we need to consider. Let’s just add this idea to our plans.”

Shimazaki also accepted the possibility of lifestyle behavior being a part of the exam without denying it.

“If it were something that took up time, we'd have to prioritize, but our private lives are inseparable from us. It doesn't require a great deal of unique effort on its own, I can get behind that.”

The idea didn't pose any real drawback even if the interpretations were split in two. And since it was something everyone could engage in on equal footing, the room naturally settled into quiet consensus, with each person nodding in agreement.

Part 1

It was lunchtime on the day the *rule-less* exam had been announced.

“Ayanokoji-kun. Do you mind sparing a moment?”

Just as I slid back my chair to stand, Shiraishi, seated beside me, softly called out.

“I don’t mind, what is it?”

“If it's alright, would you like to have lunch with me in the cafeteria today?”

An unexpected invitation from my neighbor.

Apparently, Yoshida sitting a little farther away, had been listening in. He suddenly spun around and approached us with a light jog.

“Hey, Ayanokoji! Let’s grab lunch together, yeah?”

He was clearly pretending to be the one inviting me, a lie so transparent it was almost admirable.

Still, from the fire in his eyes, I could tell he was giving it his all, like an actor gunning for a Best Supporting Role award.

Shiraishi narrowed her eyes and gazed fondly at the easy-to-read Yoshida.

In this situation, there was probably only one best course of action I could take.

“It's quite a coincidence for invitations to overlap like this. You don’t mind if Yoshida joins us too, right?”

If this had been something more serious like a personal consultation or exam-related topic I’d have had to steer others away. So, I decided to check just in case.

“Of course, it’s no problem. I wasn’t planning to bring up anything heavy. In fact, would it be alright if I invited Nishikawa too? I figured it might be more fun with a few more people.”

Realizing it was nothing more than a casual lunch invitation, I had no reason to refuse.

“Yoshida, that okay with you?”

“What, Shiraishi and the others are coming too? Well... I guess that’s fine.”

This, too, was a blatantly obvious act. He couldn't quite hide his happiness. In fact, he was trying so hard to put on a straight face which only made his grin leak out even more. He’s painfully obvious.

Such an easy-to-read guy, Yoshida, must be irresistibly amusing (or perhaps cute?) to Shiraishi. She kept watching him with a gentle warm smile.

“Morishita-san, would you like to come too?” she asked, ever polite.

As Nishikawa also stepped in, a small circle began to form. Just then, Shiraishi turned her gaze behind me.

“I'm all good, I'm o-cluck-ay.”

> **Translator's Note:** Morishita’s line **「結構結構コケコッコです」** is pronounced *“kekkou kekkou kokekokko desu.”* Here, *“kekkou”* (repeated twice) means *“I’m all good”* or *“I’m okay,”* followed by *“kokekokko,”* the Japanese onomatopoeia for a rooster’s sound. The wordplay relies on the similar sounds between *“kekkou”* and *“kokekokko.”*
> Since English lacks that specific phonetic overlap, we recreated the rhythm and humor with a chicken-themed pun: *“I’m all good, I’m o-cluck-ay.”* In this version, *“I’m okay”* is fused with *“cluck,”* the English onomatopoeia for a rooster’s sound. While also maintaining the repetition from the japanese line.

Morishita replied in a deliberately strange and playful tone, clearly turning down the offer in her quirky way.

It was just after the exam announcement when the lunch invitation happened.

Hashimoto glanced over at me briefly, but hearing it was just a regular meal, he had no intention of joining the group. He stood alone and strode down the hallway, presumably deciding to make good use of the time by gathering information or scouting around on his own.

Soon after, Morishita quietly slipped out of the classroom too.

“Looks like I got turned down,” Shiraishi murmured.

“Don't worry about Morishita or anything. Come on, let's go.”

Yoshida said that to Shiraishi, and turned his eyes towards the classroom exit.

“Hold on. There’s someone else I want to invite. Mind if I ask them too?”

“Someone else? Ah, Hashimoto?”

“No, he’s already left.”

“Oh, is that so? He's usually the one to talk to you, though. Then who is it?”

I turned my gaze toward the back of a certain student still seated at their desk.

The three of them followed my gaze, understood who I meant, and blinked in surprise.

“You're serious?”

“Dead serious,” I affirmed.

After showing a stern face, Yoshida glanced at Shiraishi and the others.

“You okay with this Shiraishi? Things could get... complicated if we include *that* person,” he warned quietly.”

Concerned that the gathering might not turn into an enjoyable meal, Yoshida hesitated and left the decision up to the others.

“Hehe, doesn’t it sound interesting? I’m all for it,” Shiraishi said with a cheerful smile.

Yoshida had secretly hoped they’d turn down the idea, but instead, Shiraishi welcomed it with her smiling permission. He looked a little thrown off by her unexpected support, but Nishikawa too chimed in with great enthusiasm without missing a beat.

“Sounds like fun. I’m in too.”

“Geez… girls are really fearless when it comes to stuff like this…” Yoshida muttered, though perhaps the real reason for their enthusiasm was the simple joy of watching him squirm.

As I watched the amused smiles on Shiraishi and Nishikawa’s faces, I couldn’t help but think so.

Pleased by their approval, I wasn’t about to let the chance slip.

With a nod of thanks, I turned and began walking toward the seat of the person in question— Kito.

Part 2

The five of us made our way to the cafeteria, each purchasing a meal ticket from the vending machines and placing our orders. With trays in hand, we found an empty corner seat in the back and sat down.

To my right was Yoshida, and to my left was Kito. Across from me sat Shiraishi. And in front of Yoshida was Nishikawa.

I had actually intended to have Yoshida and Shiraishi sit facing each other. Whether it was out of reservation or shyness, but he subtly avoided that arrangement.

He probably thought he was acting natural, but Shiraishi and Nishikawa seemed to pick up on it. Especially Nishikawa, who didn't even try to hide her amused grin.

"Ugh... It's Ayanokoji..."

I heard a voice nearby, turning my gaze, I saw Ike and Hondou, trays in hand, eyeing our direction. They were likely planning to sit nearby, but upon noticing me, they abruptly veered away.

"It seems you've become quite an object of dislike, Ayanokoji-kun." Nishikawa quipped.

"Well, that's hardly surprising. From their perspective he's a complete traitor, after all."

That's right. If I had been the one avoiding them, it would've been absurdly presumptuous. But them avoiding me was a normal reaction. Acting friendly with me now would only invite suspicion.

"The special exam's coming up. Probably don't want to risk leaking anything," Nishikawa added.

"That's probably it."

Listening to the exchange between Nishikawa and Yoshida, I entertained a similar thought.

Honestly, I want them to have at least that much of a defensive mindset, and if I were to hope for more, I'd prefer if they were cunning enough to sit near their enemies just to steal intel.

If Ike and the others just sat nearby, the five of us here would be unable to make any careless remarks, that would also act as a subtle form of harassment against me.

Yet from Ike and Hondo, there wasn't so much as a whiff of such intent, it seemed they were just about to sit near us by chance.

Without even turning back, the two of them seemed to settle into seats farther away.

"Ah, right, right— I meant to bring this up earlier," Yoshida said suddenly, eager to shift the mood. "Have you seen this month's OAA rankings yet?"

We'd only just passed by some of my old classmates when Yoshida, as if skimming over the moment, steered the conversation elsewhere, drifting the question to everyone seated around the table.

"I haven't yet," replied Shiraishi. "Was there something unusual?"

Nishikawa and I shook our heads in sync. Kito didn't even bother to react.

After glancing around to make sure no one was watching, Yoshida smirked and casually pointed a thumb at me.

"This guy's…. Ayanokoji's OAA."

He then pulled out his phone and showed the screen to Nishikawa and Shiraishi, before turning it toward us.

OAA Evaluation

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka

❖

Academic Ability	A+	(96)
Physical Ability	A-	(81)
Adaptability & Critical Thinking	B	(66)
Social Contribution	B+	(77)
Overall Ability	B+	(80)

Apparently, this was my OAA, displaying the latest school evaluation.

“Is there something special about it?” I asked.

“Don’t '*is there something*' me,” Yoshida shot back. “Just look at the overall score B+. That’s top-tier among all third-years. It proves that everything from the class transfer, and the previous special exam, had a major influence on your academic ability, critical thinking, and social contribution scores.”

It’s true that I haven't been intentionally holding back since transferring to Class C.

I haven't slacked on written exams, and I've been participating as usual in PE and other assigned tasks. Compared to my first and second years, it was probably inevitable that my scores would improve.

Of course, transferring classes could've hurt my social contribution score, depending on how the school viewed it. But I used a legitimate, school-approved process. It was all within the rules. So it probably didn't impact my evaluation too much positively or negatively.

"And now, even if it's just temporary, you're the leader of Class C. Damn, man... you're seriously amazing," Yoshida said, a genuine note of admiration in his voice.

"You seem awfully happy, Yosshi. Ayanokoji-kun might be amazing, but in the end, aren't those someone else's grades? To think you can be that happy over grades that aren't your own." Shiraishi chimed in with a teasing smile.

Yoshida puffed up, throwing his hands as he spoke.

"Of course I'm hyped, he's one of us now. You cheer on national baseball and soccer players even if they've got nothing to do with you, right? It's that same feeling of camaraderie. That home run the other day, or that epic comeback goal? Gave me chills, man. The whole country was partying."

Yoshida argued passionately, but his passion didn't seem to get through to Nishikawa.

"Really? I don't get it. I don't like sweaty, smelly sports like that," she said, dismissing his excitement without hesitation. Yoshida winced and quickly turned to Shiraishi.

"S-Shiraishi? You get what I mean, right?"

"Of course," she said, smiling gently. "I'm one of those cheering for Ayanokoji-kun too. I'm truly happy we were able to welcome someone so exceptional to our class."

"Right!? I knew I wasn't the only one!"

"I mean, I'm more jealous than happy," Nishikawa chimed in, rolling her eyes. "Those are grades anyone would envy."

“You're just narrow-minded, Nishikawa.”

“Are you claiming you're seeing things as they really are? Besides, blind faith strikes me as a perilous mindset. The whole 'go with the flow' mentality or 'a red light isn't scary if everyone crosses together' doesn’t sit well with me. Sadly, I refuse to unconditionally cheer for those so-called heroes. I’m the kind who grows tired of one-sided media coverage.”

As Yoshida’s enthusiasm clashed with Nishikawa’s cynicism, her unwavering bluntness painted her stance clear.

“You really do have a great personality,” he said, his sarcasm thick in the air.

“Thanks.”

Nishikawa narrowed her eyes and smiled, unfazed by Yoshida’s sarcasm.

“What about you, Kito-kun?” Shiraishi turned to the boy who’d silently followed them to the cafeteria. “What do you think of Ayanokoji-kun’s OAA?”

Though seated among us, Kito hadn’t spoken a word. His eyes remained fixed on his curry rice, unmoving.

Would he praise it like Yoshida and Shiraishi? Or react with the same skepticism as Nishikawa?

By this school's standards, it's still easy for me to aim higher, which is precisely why I want to grasp the effect my superficial scores have on the class dynamics in as much detail as possible.

If too many students like Nishikawa harbored resentment, I might need to reconsider my approach.

“Pointless,” Yoshida scoffed. “No use asking. He’ll just say he’s not interested.”

“I have no interest in others’ OAA scores,” Kito replied quietly, but with a calm conviction that left no room for doubt.

“Told you,” Yoshida said with a shrug.

“But—”

Suddenly, Kito’s sharp gaze cut across the table, as if piercing right through me.

“...What I *am* interested in is why someone with *that* much talent would keep it hidden for two years. And more importantly... why you’ve decided to reveal it now.”

OAA was first implemented at the beginning of our second year, around the time Nagumo took over as student council president.

Back then, my scores were as average as they could get.

“Come to think of it, what was Ayanokoji's old OAA score like? I know I looked through all the classes' at one point, but I’ve no memory of it now.”

“I don't remember either~. My impression of Ayanokoji-kun was super faint. How about you, Asuka?”

> **Translator’s Note:** Nishikawa is revealed to be on a first-name basis with Shiraishi here.

“Hmm... I’m afraid I don’t recall anything either.”

Apparently, none of the three had any recollection of what my OAA data used to look like. I stayed silent and quietly pulled the numbers from memory:

OAA Evaluation

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka

Academic Ability	C	(51)
Physical Ability	C+	(60)
Adaptability & Critical Thinking	D+	(37)
Social Contribution	C+	(60)
Overall Ability	C	(51)

Undeniably, it was the very definition of average, a set of scores with no traits worth noting, no achievements to catch the eye. Just another unremarkable student lost in the crowd.

That's precisely why, when compared to a year ago, my growth is undeniably among the top in the entire grade. It's for no other reason than that I was deliberately holding back, so it's natural for others to find my current growth unusual.

However, it's certainly not something to be proud of.

I won't touch on it here since it involves another class, and one I used to belong to at that, but in terms of pure improvement, Sudo is the one with an OAA to be proud of.

"I'm sure they were normal grades, but that's precisely why I find your current OAA is so compelling. If you had demonstrated your potential from the very start, Ayanokoji-kun, I'm certain Horikita-san's Class A would have earned far more class points and been in a much higher position by now. Sorry to get off-topic, but... why *did* you start getting serious all of a sudden?"

Kito, seemingly handing the rest of the conversation over to Shiraishi, scooped up a mouthful of curry and rice with a large spoon and shoveled it into his mouth.

“I don’t like standing out,” I said simply. “Back then, I had no interest in graduating from Class A, so I never had any intention of getting too involved in the class’s success or failure.”

“So what changed? Before third year? Or after?” Nishikawa tilted her head, eyes sharp. “If you’re being honest, that’s a *huge* change. That is *if* you’re being honest.”

Just like she did with Yoshida, she greeted my words with visible skepticism.

“I am aware that you may not believe me, but it’s the truth.”

Nishikawa leaned in carrying the same skeptical look.

“Well then tell me, what made someone like you, who didn’t like standing out and couldn’t care less about playing seriously, suddenly decide to go all in?”

“I believe I've explained this already, so it's a bit late to bring it up now. A major factor was Hashimoto asking me for help, saying they couldn't win anymore now that Sakayanagi was gone. I figured if I could put my abilities to use, then I might as well take on the role of class leader.”

Here, I took a moment to re-emphasize that the transfer was Hashimoto's accomplishment.

Hashimoto, after all, was still viewed with suspicion and largely shunned by the class.

“Hmm… Still doesn’t quite add up, don’t you think, Asuka?” Nishikawa said, frowning.

Shiraishi paused to think before nodding slowly.

“Even if your intention was to help… I doubt that alone would justify moving to a lower class. If you’d stayed in Class A, you could’ve led them instead, and things might have gone even smoother.”

“Exactly. There was no real need to go out of your way to take such a big risk and ‘betray’ your class, right~?” Nishikawa added.

“Hey, hold on, go easy on him,” Yoshida interjected. “What if he loses motivation because of all this?”

“If a little pushback is enough to make him quit, then maybe he wasn’t that serious to begin with,” Nishikawa said with a chuckle, casually brushing aside Yoshida’s attempt to defend me.

“Well… but still…” Yoshida seemed unsure, trailing off, but I cut in.

“It's not that simple. Class A had established Horikita as its leader, and her position was solid. If I suddenly stepped forward within that situation, it would have only created chaos. Besides, if I were to be a leader seriously, there would be no point unless I did something like rebuilding a class from the bottom ranks.”

“……So you're saying you want to climb to Class A with your own two hands, even if it's a struggle?”

When I nodded in response Yoshida returned it, nodding twice, maybe three times, like he was genuinely impressed.

“That kind of spirit… I respect it.”

“Or maybe you’re just a huge masochist,” Nishikawa chimed in, grinning. “I mean, seriously? You for real?”

Still laughing, Nishikawa relentlessly kept voicing her lingering doubts. It was unlikely her suspicions would be cleared here, but it would probably be best to keep answering.

However, before I could say anything, Yoshida’s expression tightened and he spoke up.

“Maybe not all of it, but I think what he's saying is, to some extent, true.”

“The words of Ayanokoji-kun's follower sound pretty light, don't they?”

“Who are you calling a follower!?”

“Okay then, how about 'Hashimoto-kun Number Two'?”

“Absolutely not. Anything but that.”

A short, fast rally of words took place. Nishikawa spun her chopsticks playfully in her fingers, clearly enjoying the back-and-forth.

“Then why would you say it’s true?” Nishikawa asked sharply.

Yoshida shrugged, keeping his cool.

“You can tell just by watching. I mean, he’s as much of a weirdo as Morishita, no offense.”

I appreciate him defending me, but being put in the same category as Morishita is unwelcoming.

“You've managed to gain so much of Yosshi's trust in the short time I haven't been looking~” Nishikawa said, feigning surprise.

“Oh, Nishikawa-san. I also trust Ayanokoji-kun a great deal, you know?”

Shiraishi chimed in, flashing a mysterious smile, just like the one Yoshida had mentioned.

“Why, why? Because he got results in the special exam? Or... is it a personal preference?”

Nishikawa gave what could be called her biggest suggestive smile of the day as she turned to Yoshida..

“P-Personal preference... what's that supposed to mean?”

Yoshida, who took the bait as expected, pressed Nishikawa as he asked back.

“You know what I mean~” Nishikawa teased. “You *want* Asuka to look at you like that, don’t you, Yosshi?”

“Well... I mean... n-no way, that's not it at all!”

I remembered the interaction I had with Shimazaki the other day. He seemed to believe the whole “100-Man Slayer” thing was just a rumor. But still, that was only *his* opinion.

In fact, he had warned afterward not to speak of his denial to anyone.

And true to his nature, Yoshida wouldn’t so much as hint at it. If anything, he spoke and acted like the rumor was gospel.

Or perhaps, while wanting to deny it, he still wasn't completely convinced by Shimazaki's words.

“I'm still holding on to the theory that he's a spy sent by Horikita-san, you know.” Nishikawa teased, a grin curling her lips.

Her words, as usual, lacked any restraint. I noticed Yoshida’s expression tighten again. He was clearly not taking it well.

“Cut it out, Nishikawa,” he warned sharply.

“Why?” she shrugged, feigning innocence. “You want me to trust him completely like you, Yosshi? I’m not that easy to win over, you know.”

“Complete trust?” Yoshida scoffed. “Don’t twist my words. There’s no such bond between Class C and Ayanokoji yet. Right now, we’re still probing each other’s intentions. That’s all.”

“Hmm? And yet, you no longer doubt Ayanokoji-kun's transfer or his future contributions anymore, do you?”

“That's not it.” Yoshida shot back. “I'm trying to start by putting my trust in him. He earned at least that much with how he handled the first special exam. Or would you rather keep doubting him forever? Saying ‘Is he really one of us?’ out loud again and again? You think that’s helpful?”

Even as Nishikawa laughed playfully, Yoshida's irritation boiled over, his voice rising with conviction. He didn’t bother hiding his frustration anymore.

“For someone like Yosshi… that was unusually cool—”

Nishikawa kept her head turned toward Yoshida, but her eyes flicked toward Shiraishi for a moment.

“Yeah… maybe you’re right,” she said softly. “It’s not something I can do right away, but… I guess it’d be nice if I could start trusting you soon, Ayanokoji-kun.”

That was a shift. Up until now, she’d thrown suspicion at me without a hint of restraint, but just then, it was like she’d taken a small step back.

“I understand both of your feelings very well. So, how about we take this opportunity to dig a little deeper into each other? Visible results like the outcome of a special exam are important, but we can't truly know someone without knowing their private lives.” Clasping her hands together, Shiraishi made such a proposal.

“That might be a good idea,” Nishikawa nodded. “Honestly, I still don’t really know what kind of person Ayanokoji-kun is.”

Maybe it was just because it came from Shiraishi, but for once, Nishikawa readily agreed.

“Well, since we’re already having lunch together,” Shiraishi smiled, “why don’t we reintroduce ourselves properly?”

Even the irritated Yoshida had no choice but to accept Shiraishi's proposal… No… his expression was already softening, the corners of his eyes were already drooping with boyish joy.

“Then, I'll start. On weekdays, if I’m alone, I usually head straight back to the dorm. If Nishikawa-san or some other friends invite me, I might stop by Keyaki Mall, but even then it’s only once or twice a week.”

Most students, unless they’re strapped for points, tend to make a detour through Keyaki Mall on their way back. It’s the only place on campus that really allows them to enjoy every part of their daily life, from shopping to blowing off some steam.

“Asuka often turns me down, even when I invite her,” Nishikawa said with a faint hint of complaint.

“I'm sorry. I tend to prefer spending time alone. However, for that very reason, on my days off, I make a point of going out and increasing my opportunities to interact with people. Even then, I usually take it easy in the morning and am more active in the afternoon. I often go to cafes or general stores.”

Shiraishi revealed more than I expected, offering a detailed picture of her daily life, clearly trying to bridge the distance between us.

Nishikawa picked up from there.

“Okay, I’m next! I’m usually at Keyaki Mall. Sometimes on my own, sometimes with friends like Takanashi-san or Tsukaji-san.” She launched into her story cheerfully, naming names, sharing conversations, and recounting outings with such vivid detail that I almost felt like I’d tagged along.

“Alright, alright. We get it, we get it, that’s more than enough.”

Yoshida, who had been listening quietly for a while, seemed to have reached his limit when it went on for several minutes, and he forcibly cut in to stop her.

Nishikawa still looked like she had more to say, but she reluctantly passed the baton to me.

“Honestly, I don't think I'm that different from other students. If I had to point out a difference, it would be that recently, I sometimes show up at the gym whenever I have some time to spare, regardless of whether it's a weekday or a day off.”

Nishikawa looked at me like she’d just discovered a new species.

“The gym on the second floor? There were actually students who went there?”

“Anyone from our class go there?”

“Hmm... probably not,” Yoshida added, scratching his head.

Apparently, no one from our group could think of a single classmate who goes. I don’t exactly go regularly myself, but I can’t recall seeing any Class C students around either.

“It might not be very popular, that's true, but there should be about 30 people from the entire school using it. And with the new first-years coming in, some new students will probably join from now on.” I said.

Besides, school staff are allowed to use the gym too. Factoring in adults, the total membership probably sits somewhere between forty and fifty.

Judging by the store's floor space and membership fees, if the rent is reasonable, it would undoubtedly operate at a loss, but it's likely able to cover the gap because the school provides some kind of generous subsidies.

“Anyone wanna join the gym?”

“Whoa, you're bad at this, Ayanokoji...”

“Seriously, inviting people like that outta nowhere? Zero sense of timing~” Nishikawa quipped with a teasing grin.

Yoshida and Nishikawa looked at me, voicing similar impressions at almost the same time.

Just then, Kito stood up abruptly, scraping his chair back with a bit too much force. He must've finished his curry, as he picked up his tray without a word.

".....I'm going back to the classroom."

he muttered, then left the group without waiting for a response.

"In the end, he barely participated in the conversation at all... Hey, why did he even agree to eat with us?"

"Beats me," Nishikawa said with a shrug. "Kito-kun's always hard to read and his face is scary too."

I wouldn't go as far as blaming Nishikawa for being blunt, but that last part was definitely unnecessary.

In any case, bridging the gap with Kito isn't going to be easy.

After he left, I continued eating in silence, thinking about what to do after school.

I had been considering dropping by the library soon, but unfortunately, today was the day an exam was announced.

There's still not enough information to narrow down the rules, so I wanted to devote my after-school time on that.

Tomorrow then, I'll make time for the library.

That way I'll have more time to catch up with Hiyori properly.

Chapter 3: To Know Who You're Dealing With

❖

As the bell signaling the end of morning homeroom rang, what swept through the classroom wasn't the usual relief, but a silence laced with tension.

The students of Class A instinctively exchanged uneasy glances.

Although the unannounced reveal of a special exam was becoming a regular occurrence, they couldn't hide their bewilderment at the slightly different turn of events.

"I—I mean, how can you say 'That's all'!? You didn't explain anything!"

Ike-kun hastily called out after Chabashira-sensei, who had already moved to the door, ready to leave.

"I told you," she responded coldly without turning her body, only her head pivoting back to meet his eyes. "I will not be accepting any questions this time."

"But still...!"

His voice trembled, caught somewhere between confusion and desperation.

With an exasperated sigh, Chabashira-sensei continued in her usual sharp tone.

"I'm not being cold just for the sake of it. It's simply the rule. We, as teachers, are prohibited from explaining the details of this specific exam."

The sternness in her voice made the tension in the room grow even more palpable. Ike-kun's face stiffened, and I could feel the same unease ripple throughout the class.

“I want you to stop acting childish and show me you've grown. Show me that you're no longer the same as when you first entered this school.”

Chabashira-sensei added that last part as if to drive home the point.

It wasn’t some petty provocation. Chabashira-sensei simply had no intention of explaining the rules in the first place. We were expected to pick up on that from the unnaturally timed announcement, made just as homeroom was about to end.

Without so much as a backward glance, she flung the door open and solemnly left the classroom. Even after the door slammed shut with a sharp *bang*, the room didn’t quiet down. On the contrary, her absence only made the noise swell.

“She seriously just left? How the hell are we supposed to do anything without knowing the rules?”

“She said she wasn't being cold on purpose, but wasn't she, like, really cold?”

“Right? She was super cold. Think it’s ‘cause we lost the last special exam?”

“But still... we tried our best...”

The room buzzed with complaints as everyone started grumbling openly, not holding back their frustration.

“I get why you’re upset, but for now, just calm down. Kicking up a fuss ain’t gonna tell us the rules!”

As if to show his irritation, Sudo-kun stuck his pinky in his left ear and called out the restless classmates.

“Sudo-kun's right, everyone. There’s no need to get so worked up. Every class is in the same situation, no one has an advantage or disadvantage at this point.”

Hirata-kun added, his calm voice following Sudo-kun's firm statement as he tried to soothe the class.

Still, Ike-kun's complaints showed no signs of stopping.

"C'mon, how are we supposed to do anything if we don't even know the rules? Wouldn't it be better to just go in blind after a week?"

"Yeah, I think that would've been better," Shinohara-san chimed in, siding with Ike-kun's frustration. "This whole thing just feels like we're being kept in limbo."

I could understand their frustration. But regardless of how they felt, the special exam had already been announced. That fact wouldn't change.

What mattered now was how we responded. Jumping to the conclusion that we had no hints before even thinking....that was the true mistake.

I couldn't let the class spiral into chaos any further. So, I stood up and spoke clearly.

"The special exam begins tomorrow. Panicking now will only waste time. What we need is to stay calm, exchange ideas, and discuss a strategy."

Still, skepticism remained.

With arms crossed and eyes fixed on the blank monitor, Hondo-kun voiced what others were thinking.

"But without the rules, what kind of ideas can we even come up with?"

"If we put our heads together, we might be able to predict the nature of the test. It's just a matter of preparing multiple options based on the possibilities," I said.

"Yeah, well, maybe you're right, but still, we can't just overlook Sensei's attitude, can we? What's up with that coldness of hers?"

Shinohara-san seemed especially displeased with the way Chabashira-sensei responded to us. A few other students also shared her sentiment.

I really don't think that should take priority over the content of the special exam...

It's true that, compared to how she used to be, Chabashira-sensei had softened quite a bit. In the latter half of our second year, she even started smiling more frequently, enough that it felt like we were looking at a completely different person. But now in our third year, with Ayanokoji-kun gone, even Sensei must be feeling the loss. It's no surprise her demeanor would show signs of change.

Still, isn't that in itself a sign that she understands Class A is about to face a difficult, uphill battle from now on?

Perhaps she's sealing away any unnecessary kindness or warmth to help us brace ourselves.

Whatever the case may be, expecting kindness from someone without giving anything back, regardless of the reason, is simply unreasonable.

That's how I saw it.

But the others didn't.

Soon, the dissatisfied stares weren't just aimed at the teacher, but at me, Hirata-kun, and Sudo-kun as well.

We were all grappling with a vague yet heavy sense of unrest. Considering that, I couldn't bring myself to reproach them outright. After all, the entire class had been caught into the dissonance that Ayanokoji-kun left behind. They were victims of it too.

And so, the first period arrived without any meaningful discussion taking place. Time slipped away without any resolution.

Part 1

During the short breaks and lunchtime, I carefully used each spare moment to approach the anxious Class A students one by one, asking for their permission to hold a discussion after school.

I wanted to ease their unrest, even just a little, so that students like Ike-kun and Shinohara-san, who had been voicing their dissatisfaction, wouldn't face the end of the school day with their feelings still in turmoil.

Sudo-kun had said my response was excessive, but seeing Chabashira-sensei remain just as cold as she was in the morning, I felt certain I'd made the right decision by taking the initiative.

"Horikita. As I mentioned during lunch, you have a student council matter to attend in an hour. You're free to hold your discussion, but don't forget," she reminded me as she passed by.

"Yes, I understand." I replied.

As expected, she didn't mention anything about the special exam during the final homeroom. She approached me briefly, said her piece, and left the classroom without another word.

Once she was gone, I stepped forward. I had no intention of letting the class fall into another round of pointless complaints like they had in the morning.

Just as I reached towards the podium, another student began to move as well.

There was only one person I hadn't spoken to, despite fully recognizing him as a point of concern.

"That guy..."

Sudo-kun muttered beside me, clicking his tongue in irritation as he turned around.

Indeed, as always, Koenji-kun, whose presence seemed to demand attention, rose from his seat alone and briskly walked out of the classroom.

“Oi, Koenji.” Sudo-kun called out, half in warning. But Koenji-kun didn’t so much as glance back or slow down. He just left.

This was typical. He doesn't interfere in our discussions, but he doesn't contribute either.

That’s precisely why I hadn’t even bothered trying to reach out to him before after-school hours. Involving him would only risk stirring unnecessary conflict. I’ve already decided it’s better to let him be.

Even Sudo-kun, the only one who called him out, probably felt the same deep down. The way he immediately lost interest in Koenji-kun’s retreating figure only confirmed it.

This is fine. We can start our discussion without him, as always. It’s smoother that way, and less prone to issues.

...But still.

Is it really okay to keep brushing it off as *typical* and let it slide forever?

“Hirata-kun, sorry, but could you get started without me? I'll be right back.”

“Okay, got it,” Hirata-kun replied with an easy nod, and I left the rest to him for the time being.

Even while understanding that begging him was futile, I hurried out into the hallway to chase after Koenji-kun.

I jogged down the hallway, following after him as he presumably headed for the shoe lockers.

As soon as I spotted his tall back in the distance, I picked up my pace and moved to walk beside him.

“Could you wait a moment?” I asked, glancing up at him from close by.

“Oh my, Horikita-girl. Do you have some business with me?” he replied, sparing me a sideways glance without even turning his head, his face still aimed squarely toward the exit.

I desperately tried to match my pace to his long, wide strides, continuing to follow him.

“I’d at least like you to hear what I have to say,” I began.

“I don’t mind listening, as long as we keep walking,” he responded casually.

“No, I want you to come back to the classroom right now and listen to the discussion.”

A modest request from my end, one I didn’t expect much from.

Koenji-kun didn’t react in any grand fashion. He simply smiled, flashing his perfectly white teeth.

“Wouldn't that be pointless? My time is exceedingly priceless, you know. Besides, you and I have an established contract. I’ve no obligation to help you beyond that, right?”

“Yes, I'm aware of that. But all I’m asking is for you to *listen* to the discussion. I’m not requesting your cooperation in the special exam. I’m not even asking you to speak.”

Even I understood that if I were to rely on his potential to secure us a win, he’d turn me down instantly. And truthfully, he had every right to do so. That’s why I offered him something simpler.

“You just have to sit there until the meeting ends. That’s all. Isn’t that simple?”

“You certainly seem passionate,” he mused. “But I just don’t get it. What’s the point?”

“Because it's necessary for the class to unite as one again. I don’t want you disrupting that balance. If even one person disrupts the discipline, it affects the morale of the whole group.”

That was my justification and an appeal. I looked up at him as I said it. Surely, it must get through to Koenji-kun, at least a little.

That's what I thought as I continued looking up at his profile, but what I received next was a scornful laugh.

“Hmph. You say the strangest things. If my absence alone can shatter the class’s unity, then your leadership must not be worth much, Horikita-girl.”

“Whether I’m competent or not isn’t the issue here. If even one student acts however they please, we can’t call ourselves ‘united’ can we? A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”

“I see. So you’re capable of giving amusing answers now,” he chuckled. “But you said ‘unite again’— now tell me, has this class, excluding me, ever truly been united as one before?”

At those merciless words, my expression stiffened for a moment, and I came to a halt.

But I couldn't let Koenji-kun walk away with just this level of pushback, so I immediately resumed walking.

“Saying we’ve never once been united as a class—that’s going too far, don’t you think? Over the past two years, maybe not always, but we’ve come together as one more than a few times. That’s why we’re in Class A now.”

We’ve faced and overcome hardships together. Maybe it's not something to boast about, but it’s still the truth.

“I'd like you to add '*in my opinion*' to that statement.” he retorted.

“It would be better if I had you add, 'in my opinion' to yours as well,” I shot back.

Even if it was just an exchange of barbs, I couldn't afford to retreat. I had to keep pressing him on.

"You're saying Class A status is proof of unity? The class only made it this far because Ayanokoji-boy was pulling the strings behind the scenes. Surely you, of all people, understand that without me having to say it, don't you?"

".....It's true that Ayanokoji-kun is no longer with us. But that doesn't mean we only ever won because of him."

"If you're saying that from the bottom of your heart, then that is truly a comical story. You talk about unity and solidarity, but aren't you just trying to convince yourself that you can still win even without Ayanokoji-boy?"

"That's—"

His merciless words felt like a blade stabbing me in the back.

"Even if I returned to the classroom, it would be meaningless. No matter how much you struggle, as long as you remain the leader, there will be no victory against other classes."

He pointed out my lack of ability without sugarcoating it in the slightest.

"So you're saying... I'm not good enough?"

Ichinose-san, who had earned the kind of trust that could unify a class.

Ryuen-kun, who used fear and intimidation to bend his class to his will.

Sakayanagi-san, who produced results with undeniable ability and was recognized for it.

And Ayanokoji-kun, who was accepted by the class in the blink of an eye due to his overwhelming strength.

Compared to them... I couldn't deny there was a difference.

“Yes… maybe you’re right. But that doesn’t mean I should give up here, does it? I have to do what I can, especially if we want to strengthen the bonds we have, however imperfect they may be.”

“I won't deny that. You’re free to do as you please. And, since I have no reason or obligation to follow your instructions, I too am free to maintain my non-participation.”

“You are an excellent student, I understand that. But now that Ayanokoji-kun has become an enemy, our class's position as Class A will be threatened before long. Are you fine with that?”

Without cooperation, graduating as Class A might no longer be possible. I needed to know, did Koenji-kun truly understand that? Was he prepared?

I carefully observed his every movement, determined not to miss even the smallest shift in behavior, any crack in his usual mask. But even as my probing gaze bore into him, Koenji-kun didn’t flinch. Instead, he met my eyes and smiled back with amusement.

“In the end, you’re no different from the others,” he said, continuing his pace without the slightest hesitation, growing more distant from the classroom with each step.

“No different...? What do you mean by that?” I asked, keeping pace.

“That cheap ploy, to stir up my sense of crisis and push me into action. That’s what I mean.”

“...You mean someone else tried this before me?”

Is there anyone in the current class who would confront Koenji-kun for his behavior? Even Sudo-kun only gave half-hearted warnings, and most students even avoided talking to him altogether.

Hirata-kun might speak to him, but he would never do anything that resembled a threat.

“Well, who knows,” Koenji-kun replied with an airy laugh.

While lost in thought, I realized we were about to arrive at the school entrance.

“Any further pursuit is a waste of time,” he said lightly. “So do yourself a favor and stop.”

“...I’d like to take that advice,” I admitted. “But I’m afraid I can’t.”

I will pursue him relentlessly, until he gives in and agrees to return back to the classroom.

I could feel the fire of resolve blazing inside me— only for that flame to be snuffed out in an instant.

“Advice? You're thoroughly misguided girl. Unfortunately, this is not advice, it is a warning.”

“...!?”

I froze. His gaze.... those sharp eyes cut through me, and I found myself holding my breath.

It was a faint, almost imperceptible edge of hostility, a frustration rarely seen from Koenji-kun.

A distinctive look in his eyes, different from what someone like Ryuen-kun, who was accustomed to intimidation, would display.

“Are you planning to make an enemy of me as well, Horikita-girl?”

He wasn’t an ally. Just neutral. And now, that neutrality was hanging by a thread.

This was a threat that if I intended to make him break that stance, he would show no mercy.

“...That’s not my intention,” I said quietly.

My resolve vanished in an instant, and I stopped in my tracks.

I had no choice but to stop.

It was one thing to lose his cooperation, but if I turned him into an enemy, the consequences would be irreversible. Koenji-kun was, for better or worse, a natural-born disruptor. If he ever truly decided to break this class apart, he wouldn't hesitate.

"Good. Well then, I shall be on my way."

And just like that, he left. I stood there with frustration twisting in my chest, powerless. In the end, I couldn't even stop him from walking away.

Part 2

While the class discussion was failing to reach any conclusion, I couldn't afford to linger. Entrusting the rest to Hirata-kun and the others, I hurried off toward the student council room to attend to my duties.

I had hoped, at the very least, to help set a direction for everyone, but that hope had slipped through my fingers.

Ideally, I would've liked to talk things through until we all reached an understanding, but this couldn't be helped.

Having accepted the role of student council president, it was my responsibility to fulfill the position with just as much commitment as I would give a special exam.

When I arrived at the student council room, Nanase-san was already there, bowing her head in greeting.

"Thank you for your time, President Horikita." she said.

"You're quite early."

With that brief exchange, we stepped into the still-empty student council room. I took my seat at the head of the table, and Nanase-san stood beside me, holding out two printed sheets.

"I just received these documents from Hojo-sensei, the homeroom teacher of Class 1-A." she said.

Each sheet contained the profile of a student— one was Kusanagi Minato from Class 1-A, the other was Maki Yuma from Class 1-D.

"And this," she added, handing me another sheet after I glanced through the profiles, "is the summary of the case we'll be handling."

There was nothing particularly complex written in the report, it was straightforward enough to grasp with a quick glance.

“So, these two got into a major fight,” I muttered.

It had happened last Friday, behind the first-year dorms. Maki-kun from Class 1-D had called out Kusanagi-kun from Class 1-A at the location described.

They had an argument which escalated, and soon they were trading blows.

Both of them struck each other multiple times, including in the face, resulting in Maki-kun sustaining injuries that would take three weeks to fully heal, and Kusanagi-kun sustaining milder injuries that would take around one week.

Their scuffle had gone unnoticed until they returned from behind the dormitory, bruised and battered, and were spotted by a passing student, who raised the alarm. Fortunately, both of them were able to return to school on Monday.

“Since it happened behind the dorm... there’s no footage of the actual fight, is there?” I asked.

“Yes,” Nanase-san nodded. “That spot’s a blind zone for the surveillance cameras. Apparently, a third-year returning to the dorm noticed the two of them just as they were heading back, and that’s how it got discovered.”

Where the cameras are, and where they aren't.

It seems even the first-year students, who have only just enrolled, are getting a grasp of such things.

“We may need to officially request the school to install more cameras,” I remarked.

“I agree,” Nanase-san replied. “I did ask Hojo-sensei about it briefly, but he said we should hear the details directly from the students themselves. He wouldn’t say much.”

"That's probably to maintain fairness. That must be the reason they've handed this judgment over to us, the student council in the first place."

Nanase-san nodded firmly, then continued, as if something had surfaced in her mind.

"Actually... a similar thing happened to me last year. I was once summoned to the student council too."

"You were? Did someone hurt you?" I asked, surprised.

"No, nothing like that. It was because of an incident involving one of my classmates..."

She gave a slight, rueful smile before beginning to explain.

It happened just before summer. Hosen Kazuomi-kun from Class 1-D and Utomiya Riku-kun from Class 1-C of the time, crossed paths in the hallway. What began as a petty dispute quickly spiraled into a heated argument. In no time, they were glaring at each other from point-blank range, on the verge of a physical fight.

The tension only escalated when students from both classes nearby started getting involved. One Class C student, having reached their breaking point, lashed out and struck a Class D student. Riding that momentum, they also charged at Hosen-kun and tried to hit him, but were effortlessly knocked down in retaliation.

"Just as Utomiya-kun, who had been holding himself back, was about to lose control too, some teachers happened to pass by and managed to defuse the situation. Later the matter was reported to the student council."

The student Hosen-kun retaliated against suffered injuries that took three weeks to heal. But considering that the Class C student had struck first and ended up hitting another student, it was unclear who should bear the greater blame. The issue dragged on for two whole weeks as repeated meetings were held to reach a fair judgment.

Nanase-san recounted it all quietly, as if replaying the events in her mind.

“Nagumo-senpai must’ve had a hard time too, huh?” Nanase-san said, her voice tinged with sympathy.

“I think so too,” I replied.

Though exasperated, I let out a quiet chuckle.

“Was it really that funny of a story?” she asked curiously.

“Not really. It’s just that... these sorts of issues pop up everywhere. I had a similar experience back in my first year.”

“Really?” she blinked in surprise.

“Yeah. A classmate of mine got into a scuffle with someone from Ryuen-kun’s class, kind of like your situation.”

At that time, my brother was sitting in this very seat where I am now.

Sudo-kun had punched a student in the special building, which led to a discussion about who started it and who was at fault. My brother, acting impartially, handled the matter with a calm and fair perspective as part of the student council. I imagine Nagumo-senpai did the same last year.

Thinking back on it, I couldn’t help but smile.

“It’s almost become a tradition, new students always causing problems at least once. The thought of that made me laugh a little.”

“Now that I’ve heard your story,” she said, “it all feels more real. I can already picture something similar happening again next year.”

“And when it does, it'll be your turn to handle it as Student Council President.”

“Eh?, M-me?”

"If things go smoothly, that's how it'll turn out. Will you take up the mantle?"

"...I hope I can live up to it. But all the previous presidents have graduated from Class A, right? And I'm... still in Class D."

Despite Nanase-san's uncertain tone, there was no mistaking it, she was the clear front-runner for the role.

"Don't let precedent shaped by coincidence weigh you down," I told her gently. "Until now, only students from Class A or B ever became student council president. But here I am, someone who started in Class D, still managing just fine."

I paused for a moment, then added, "This may serve as a good example, but even I have no guarantee of graduating in Class A."

After all, our current standing in Class A was only temporary. If not for Ayanokoji-kun's quiet support behind the scenes, we never would've made it here in the first place.

I looked her in the eyes. "At the very least, I believe you're more than qualified to be the next student council president. Believe in yourself."

"...Thank you," Nanase-san replied quietly. "For now, I want to prove myself as secretary and show results."

Though still reserved, she accepted my words with sincerity, nodding and bowing in gratitude.

"The fact that their fight has been brought to the student council means it's gotten quite serious," I said, switching topics. "Before they arrive, let me brief you on my thoughts. Depending on how things unfold, I'll need your support."

One of the students involved was from Class A. Usually, it's Class C or D students who cause these kinds of violent disturbances, but not this time.

Kusanagi-kun had both physical ability and academic scores at a B+ level. Clearly, he wasn't just strong, he was smart too. We'll need to be prepared accordingly.

"Of course."

With the remaining time, I briefed Nanase-san on several backup plans. Before long, a dry knock echoed through the student council room, it was time.

"They're here, it seems. Please, come in," she called out.

As the door opened, two male students stepped in, glaring daggers at one another. Their flashy, rebellious hairstyles immediately gave off the impression of delinquents. Their attitudes were just as defiant, with no trace of remorse, each clearly convinced that the other was to blame.

But more than their looks or demeanor, what stood out now were their faces.

"……My, those are some pretty bad injuries." Nanase-san muttered, unable to keep it to herself.

The student standing on my left was Maki-kun from Class 1-D. On the right was Kusanagi-kun from Class 1-A.

While a doctor might diagnose a recovery time of two to three weeks even for lighter injuries, what we saw now was nothing short of brutal. Both of them had swollen, battered faces, evidence that they had truly gone all out. Maki-kun's wounds were especially severe. It was painfully obvious who had the upper hand in the fight.

"You understand why you've been summoned to the student council room, don't you?" Nanase-san asked, gently steering them toward accountability.

"Tch, hell no I don't," one of them snapped. "Why the hell was I even called in for? He's the one who started it."

Kusanagi-kun immediately snapped back, baring his teeth at Maki-kun as he shouted,

"Hah?! Don't screw with me, you bastard! You're the one who started this!"

Maki-kun scoffed. "Yeah, right! You swung first. Not that it landed or anything!"

A fierce shouting match broke out, both trying to pin the blame on the other for starting the fight. Nanase-san and I exchanged glances but chose not to intervene just yet. We judged letting them vent out their frustrations now would make things easier later.

What started as simply pushing blame onto each other gradually escalated to unnecessary insults and verbal abuse, and eventually, the topic devolved into irrelevant things like height and appearance.

"Children." I muttered.

"Children, indeed." Nanase-san echoed softly.

They may have just entered high school, but they were already stepping into territory that couldn't be overlooked. Their fight was escalating, showing no sign of stopping, if anything, it looked like they might come to blows again right here in the Student Council Room.

"This has gone far enough. I'll need you both to quiet down now," Nanase-san warned them, unable to bear the racket.

The boys shot her a glance but didn't stop. They were clearly looking down on her, thinking they didn't have to listen, just because she was a girl.

Their condescending attitude was obvious to anyone watching.

Nanase-san's words may not have silenced them, but it was clear they heard it, which was enough for now. Their bickering stemmed from mutual dissatisfaction, nothing more. In that case, all I have to do is act as if I'm about to hand down the most dissatisfying ruling.

I sent a glance toward Nanase-san.

Our eyes met, and she gave a small nod, having perfectly grasped my intentions.

"If you two insist on arguing as you please, then there's no need to continue this meeting," she said coldly, her voice detached. "We may have to impose severe penalties on both sides. Are you all right with that?"

I silently scraped back my chair and rose to my feet.

"Hah? Hold up— that's total BS!"

"This isn't something for a student council, or some girl, to butt into!"

"Please use polite language when you speak." Nanase-san warned calmly.

They shot back angry glares, clearly dissatisfied with our stance. Maybe they thought that would make us back off. How naive.

"This is the Advanced Nurturing High School, and the student council holds a certain degree of authority. This meeting is a rare opportunity to uncover the truth. If you intend to trample over it, then we won't waste another second. Let's file a report to the teachers, President."

"Don't just end it on your own!"

"You two are free to leave," Nanase-san said with a light, dismissive gesture. "Or, if you wish to continue your little shouting match, please do so in the hallway."

They were still new to the school, far too early in their time here for any lecture about what's best for the class to resonate. For boys like them, the worst-case scenario was simple: that neither of their arguments would be accepted. Their fragile pride wouldn't be able to bear that outcome.

But gradually, they began to sense the shift. A strange weight in the room they hadn't noticed before.

From the moment they'd entered the Student Council room, I hadn't said a single word to them.

".....Why is the Student Council President just stayin' quiet? Say something."

They clearly recognized me from the entrance ceremony speech, they knew exactly who I was.

"You've been watching all this, right? Then you should know who's in the wrong!" they said, pointing fingers at one another, each insisting it was the other who was to blame.

They'd probably thought they could keep going like this until I stepped in and gave a verdict.

But I said nothing.

Because this situation wasn't even worth responding to— and I let my silence make that crystal clear.

Eventually, the effect began to take hold. The loud tension that had filled the student council room slowly dissolved into silence. A tense, heavy stillness.

They'd realized it, they were the only ones making fools of themselves here.

Still clinging to their pride, they opened their mouths as if to protest once more, but all that came out was a quiet mumble, too faint to hear. In the end, both of them clamped their lips shut.

“...So what are we supposed to do?” Finally both of them almost in unison, asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

And at last, they looked to me, no longer to argue, but to ask for resolution.

“It seems they are willing to resolve things. What would you like to do, President?”

I gave a quiet nod and gestured for Nanase-san to take the lead.

“Alright then, Kusanagi-kun, could you please tell us your side of the story again? While he's speaking, Maki-kun, I ask that you stay completely silent, no matter how dissatisfied you may be. You'll get your turn to speak afterward. Is that clear?”

With his lips tightly pressed, Maki-kun gave a reluctant nod at Nanase-san’s firm instruction.

“This guy... Maki, was lookin' at me like I was something nasty stuck to his shoe. So I asked what the hell his problem was, and he just snapped. Next thing I know, he’s calling me out behind the dorms. I wasn't gonna back down either, so I showed up, and the moment I did, he came swingin’ at me like a madman. Well, I had a hunch I was stronger, so I dodged him lightly and then fed him a counter.”

He knew full well that if he interrupted now, he risked being painted as the bad guy. But if he stayed silent, preserving his chance to defend himself.

Maki-kun must've picked up on that instinctively.

Kusanagi-kun went on for a while, pinning all the blame on Maki-kun. When it was clear no new testimony would emerge, we shifted the turn to Maki-kun, who had endured in silence until now.

"You've got some nerve saying whatever you want skipping all the inconvenient parts! He's the one who called me a defective product first! All I wanted was for him to take it back! And don't give me that 'hunch I was stronger' crap— *I* was the one who had you trembling after that body shot, and you know it!"

Maki-kun let his pent-up frustration spill out right into Kusanagi-kun's ear.

Kusanagi-kun averted his eyes, awkward and clearly pretending to know nothing.

'Defective product,' huh....that's a term I haven't heard in a long time.

We, as first-year Class D students, had been summoned in exactly the same way. Perhaps this too is one of those unpleasant traditions that have been inherited by the school yet again this year.

Laying aside emotions and arranging the facts from both sides made things somewhat clearer. It began when Kusanagi-kun called Maki-kun a "defective product," a blatant insult. Maki-kun, understandably enraged, called him out behind the dorms and demanded he retract the statement.

But Kusanagi-kun refused, and Maki-kun, unable to bear his smug attitude any longer, lashed out. His first punch missed. Kusanagi-kun's counter, however, landed cleanly. What followed was a scuffle that quickly turned into a brawl. Judging by their injuries, it was clear that Maki-kun had lost.

Yet he refused to admit it, insisting he had the upper hand the entire time. Kusanagi-kun, on the other hand, claimed victory and said he had stopped fighting the moment the outcome was clear.

Their stories are completely at odds, making it impossible to judge fairly.

After Maki-kun finished speaking, Kusanagi-kun shot him another glare before relaxing his face and turning to me with a confident smile.

“You get it, don’t you, President? I mean, we’re both in Class A. It was just pure self-defense.”

It was the first time he’d used proper respectful language, but that alone wasn’t enough to earn him any favor.

“Being in Class A is just a label,” I replied coldly. “Fools are punished, regardless of rank. And even students in Class D are praised when they do what’s right.”

“H-Huh? But...!”

His mood shifted instantly.

So there are students this hot-tempered even in Class A this year.

“It may be true that Maki-kun was the one who called you out. But that doesn’t justify responding so recklessly. Especially since you immediately sensed that you were stronger than him, right?”

“That's...!”

“Well, for someone so confident that they were stronger, it seems you've also sustained some nasty injuries, haven't you?”

Even if Kusanagi-kun had a slight edge, the damage they dealt each other suggested they were more or less evenly matched.

Kusanagi-kun averted his gaze when pressed, clearly displeased but unable to deny the point.

“No wonder you can’t answer,” Maki-kun sneered. “You didn’t win, after all.”

“Don’t screw with me, Maki. No matter how you slice it, I’m stronger!”

At this rate, if they refused to apologize or reconcile, the only fair move would be to assign punishment proportionate to their injuries— Maki-kun: 40, Kusanagi-kun: 60.

Just as I was beginning to think that—

“I didn’t even hit Maki that bad in the first place... damn it,” Kusanagi-kun muttered through clenched teeth.

It was more of an unintentional slip of the tongue than something meant for us to hear.

Normally, one would take that as an act meant to save himself, but Maki-kun, standing next to him, not only didn't object to the statement but made a gesture as if to ignore it.

Given the flow of the conversation up to this point, he absolutely should have refuted it.

That silence was off. Nanase-san and I instinctively exchanged glances.

“What do you mean, you didn’t hit him *that* much?” I pressed.

“Nah, it's nothing.” he muttered, clearly trying to backtrack.

“It’s not ‘nothing,’” I replied sharply. “Violence is violence, but it's clear that Maki-kun has suffered more serious injuries. Taking the school's judgment into account as well, you may receive a harsher punishment. Shouldn't you be defending yourself properly?”

For a brief moment, the two boys who had done nothing but glare at each other, met each other's eyes for real.

It looked almost like the kind of eye contact I sometimes exchange with Nanase-san.

“There’s nothing more to say... What I said is all of it,” he muttered, almost like he was tired. “Right, Maki?”

“Yeah, pretty much.... Besides, Kusanagi's definitely the one at fault, right?” Maki-kun grumbled.

“Seriously? You’re *still* saying that?” Kusanagi-kun barked back.

And just like that, we were back at square one.

"If there aren't any new testimonies, we'll be concluding this here. Are you *really* fine with that?"

"From what I've heard, you're both equally at fault." I said, reaffirming the student council's stance. Both boys still showed signs of dissatisfaction and protested, but their words began to dwindle, as if realizing that further protest would lead nowhere unless new information came to surface.

"...Fine," one of them muttered at last. "Same punishment for both of us, huh?"

"Tch. Whatever. This was a complete waste of time..." the other grumbled, clearly displeased, yet conceding all the same.

Kusanagi-kun followed Maki-kun's lead, voicing reluctant agreement though still visibly bitter.

Just moments ago, the two had been throwing blame back and forth. It was clear, they had both been trying to lighten their own punishment if possible.

Nanase-san urged them one more time to speak if they had something to say, but their stiff silence showed no signs of thawing.

The Student Council couldn't detain them indefinitely either, so we decided to dismiss them for the day, concluding that the results would be delivered at a later date.

Part 3

The student council room had fallen completely silent once more. I let out a sigh, without reservation.

“This whole matter... if we really wanted, we could just wrap it up with a fair and balanced ruling.”

“They aren’t denying that they fought, but isn’t it strange how both of them suddenly accepted punishment after that suspicious slip of the tongue?” Nanase-san expressed.

Kusanagi-kun admitted to hitting Maki-kun and claimed he had the upper hand.

On the other hand, Maki-kun also insisted *he* had the upper hand.

Yet the difference in their injuries was quite clear, Kusanagi-kun was dominant by far.

That decisive facial bruise made all the difference, though oddly, Kusanagi-kun muttered he hadn't struck hard enough to cause *that* kind of injury.

What was even stranger was how Maki-kun, despite having a perfect chance to twist that into a claim that Kusanagi-kun had gone too far, didn't pursue the point. He just let it go. He could've jumped at the opportunity to lighten his own guilt, even if it wasn’t entirely the truth. But he didn’t.

“How did you interpret it, President?” Nanase-san asked. “To me, it looked like Maki-kun didn't want to admit defeat and prioritized his pride.”

“I see. That's a possibility, but..... at first, it definitely looked like he wanted to place heavy blame on Kusanagi-kun. So it's strange that he didn't pursue that slip of the tongue. Couldn't he have also protected his pride by saying something like, 'I deliberately held back my punches, but Kusanagi-kun didn't stop attacking'?”

When I answered that, Nanase-san closed her eyes as if deep in thought.

Or perhaps.... it's time to look at this from a completely different angle.

"There could be another person involved in this assault case..."

That idea alone made me want to reevaluate both their testimonies. As I replayed the details in my head, I felt like a sliver of the truth began to emerge.

"But Kusanagi-kun was the one who won the fight, wasn't he? If it were an act of revenge, wouldn't it not make sense unless Kusanagi-kun was the one who was badly hurt?"

"Revenge isn't the only motive. It's not impossible that a third party, unsatisfied with Maki-kun's actions, decided to punish him for picking a fight and losing. Not that it makes it any more acceptable."

".....I see. That's one way to look at it. But then we can't explain why Kusanagi-kun wouldn't report it. Is it because he's afraid of blowback from the person who administered that punishment.....?"

"That's close to what I was thinking."

If someone like Ryuen-kun or Hosen-kun had gotten involved and punished Maki-kun, it wouldn't be a stretch to imagine Kusanagi-kun, despite winning, not daring to speak out. Still, I found it unlikely. Would upperclassmen really go out of their way for something as petty as a scuffle between freshmen, and even show up at the first-year dorm?

Besides, if such dangerous upperclassmen were involved, there's no way the two boys would be openly throwing blame at each other in front of the student council. They would've been ordered to play nice, show remorse, and move on.

But those two? They showed no signs of that. Both of them were proud and confident in their fighting abilities, and neither had any intention of telling us everything.

That much, at least, I could say for certain.

“But President—”

“I understand,” I cut in gently. “As far as I know, there doesn’t seem to be anyone among this year’s first-years like Ryuen-kun or Hosen-kun— to be ruling through violence and fear. That’s what you were getting at, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Nanase-san nodded. “I can’t think of a single male student who stands out as someone trying to control the class through intimidation.”

Still… could someone simply be hiding it well?

I glanced back at the documents Nanase-san had provided me earlier. Maybe I should talk to the first witness who discovered the two injured students? Or perhaps call Maki-kun and Kusanagi-kun again once they’ve cooled off? I could even try speaking to them separately… though I doubt bruising their pride would get us any closer to the truth.

“…Say, Nanase-san. Boys tend to think a little childishly, don’t they?”

“Hmm, yeah. I’d say they definitely have that side to them. Those two, after all… they were like kids the whole time they were in the council room.”

“Exactly. The problem is, both Kusanagi-kun and Maki-kun believe themselves to be strong. And because of that, all they could focus on was who won or lost the fight. Even in front of the student council, despite the threat of punishment, they didn’t back down an inch. All they did was try to shift the blame onto each other.”

“Yes.” she replied.

“What if someone had actually taken on both of those self-assured fighters at once?”

“You mean they lost a two-on-one fight and had their pride crushed? It’s not impossible, but would that really be enough to make them go completely silent? They could’ve just teamed up and shifted the blame onto that one person.”

“But what if their opponent wasn’t a boy... but a girl? And just one girl at that?” I added.

Nanase-san, who had been listening quietly beside me, gasped softly and turned to face me, her expression one of realization.

“It's possible.... those two boys who boast and insist they didn't lose a fight would certainly be too embarrassed to admit they lost to a high school girl.”

This incident could be closed, since the two boys had accepted their punishment without further protest.

However, if a third party is involved in this fight, especially if that person was the true aggressor, then this was no longer just a schoolyard scuffle. That is a clear case of assault.

For the sake of maintaining order going forward, we had to deal with this now, while we still could.

“Since neither of the boys have come forward, we’ll have to take the initiative to investigate. Nanase-san, would you be willing to help me get to the bottom of this?”

“Of course, President. But being the Student Council President must be exhausting. You're really amazing, Horikita-senpai.”

“I'm not that amazing. It's true I was often called excellent in middle school, but Ayanokoji-kun, my brother, Nagumo-senpai... no, Sakayanagi-san and Ichinose-san too. Watching them up close, I'm just constantly made to realize it. Compared to them, I’m undeniably... just ordinary.”

It was pathetic self-deprecation, but I spoke my honest thoughts.

Maybe it was because I still hadn't quite shaken off how casually Koenji-kun brushed me off after school.

For some reason, Nanase-san's eyes widened in slight surprise as she stared at me intently.

"Even so... I think it's fine. It's not a bad thing at all. You're perfectly fine just the way you are, *ordinary* Horikita-senpai."

Ordinary.

"Hmph..... For some reason, hearing that is getting me annoyed a little."

No matter how I looked at it, it sounded like she was mocking me.

"W-wha!?!?! I-I'm sorry! I think you're very splendid, President Horikita!"

Completely flustered, Nanase-san stumbled over her words in a panic.

"No use trying to smooth it over now," I said, feigning irritation—before cracking a smile and gently resting my hand on her shoulder.

"Lend me your strength for a while, okay?"

"Y-yes! Of course!"

Part 4

The Student Council matters couldn’t be ignored, but at the same time, I had my own duties as a class leader. Though fatigue pressed down on me, I arrived at the meeting point, Keyaki Mall, just before 6 PM.

This exam, no matter how small the reward or the fluctuation in class points, held significant importance.

And it was scheduled to take place either starting tomorrow for a week, or beginning a week later.

If we were to avoid losing, and aim to win, then today was the only chance to prepare.

As I neared the supermarket inside the mall, I spotted a student standing at the entrance and jogged over to her.

“Hey. The weather’s been pretty awful lately, hasn’t it?” said Karuizawa-san as we met up.

“Yeah. The rainy season shouldn't be here quite yet, though,” I replied.

Just this past Sunday, it had rained the entire day, and the forecast even mentioned a chance of rain again tonight, past midnight.

“Thanks for coming out to shop with me at this hour.” I said.

“No, not at all. I was thinkin' of goin' to the supermarket anyway, so don't worry about it.” she smiled.

We each grabbed a shopping basket and slowly made our way from the fruit section near the entrance toward the vegetable section.

As I picked up a golden kiwi that was on sale, I turned to look at Karuizawa-san.

“Did you feel anything unusual during today’s after-school meeting?”

“Hmm, I wonder. It felt like business as usual. No one could agree, everyone was just sayin' whatever they wanted... And, uh, I mean, why are you even askin' *me* for my opinion?”

She answered with a wry smile, as if to say, I'm definitely not suited for this kind of thing, you know?

She wasn’t wrong; Karuizawa-san had never been one to be proactive in serious discussions. Most of the conversation was usually left to me, Hirata-kun, or the more vocal classmates.

“We can't keep doing the same things as always. That's why I want to take a step towards changing.”

“And that's why you chose me? Well, normally you wouldn't come to me for advice on an exam since I'm not useful for that.”

“That’s not it,” I said, meeting her gaze. “Yes, I did reach out to you because I want things to change. But I don’t think you’re useless. You’re not who you used to be.”

I said it knowing I might upset her, but sugarcoating things, pretending she’d always been dependable, would’ve been far more insulting.

“You really don’t hold back, do you, Horikita-san?” she said, smiling softly. “But I like that about you.”

Without even a hint of irritation, Karuizawa-san accepted my honesty with a smile.

She was far wiser as a person than I’d ever given her credit for. That realization alone was a significant gain.

“Well then,” she said playfully, “since I’m apparently useful now, maybe I’ll lend you a hand. What do *you* think is the key rule behind this special exam, Horikita-san?”

Before I could even begin to ask *her* anything, Karuizawa-san turned the tables and threw a question my way. The moment struck me as oddly funny, and I couldn't help but laugh softly.

I hadn't even been part of the after-school discussion for a full hour, but my classmates had tossed out quite a few plausible ideas: the usual written test, a sports challenge, oral exams, presentations, music performance, even interviews. Some went as far as to suggest programming, fine art, or sketching assessments.

The general consensus was that some kind of test would be held a week from now.

Many leaned toward interviews, likely influenced by the fact that we're third-years staring down college entrance exams and job applications.

Given the one-week preparation time and absence of any rule explanations, it wasn't a theory that could be dismissed.

But the opinion was also raised that if it really were an interview, they'd have told us outright, it's not the kind of thing you keep under wraps.

Anyway, there were ideas ranging from the plausible to the unrealistic, but none of them could be considered as a definitive answer. Still, since some ideas overlapped, narrowing them down would certainly make things more efficient.

Especially if the test turned out to be academic in nature, whether it involved all subjects or just specific ones, the outcome would drastically change based on our interpretation.

I shared some of my thoughts with Karuizawa-san. Normally, a conversation like this would bore her, but she listened carefully, without a hint of displeasure.

And soon, the conversation took a turn—deeper, more speculative. Something I could only have with her.

As we walked past the seasonings aisle, she spoke up.

“This is just my hunch, but... I think Class C and Class D are in some sort of alliance.”

“Ayanokoji-kun is helping Ichinose-san... is that what you're saying?”

“Yes. I'm sure that's what happened last time, and I think it will be similar this time as well.”

She looked me straight in the eye, her tone calm and steady. It was Karuizawa-san who first raised that possibility as a reason for our loss in the last special exam.

Of course, we don’t have proof yet. I had sensed something odd between Ayanokoji-kun and Ichinose-san ever since the transfer, but I hadn’t expected things to have progressed to the point where they’d be sharing information behind the scenes.

“What do you think, Horikita-san?”

“...I think the possibility is not low,” I responded after a pause. “From Ayanokoji-kun’s perspective, it’s only natural that he wouldn’t want our Class A to win. Since he didn’t get the chance to challenge us directly last time, supporting Ichinose-san by feeding her information is a strategy that makes sense. After all, he knows our class better than anyone.”

While I was non-functional, Hirata-kun and the others took the lead and chose the members for the minority battle.

I'm sure Ayanokoji-kun could have imagined that scene even without seeing it directly. What kind of discussions were held, and what kind of conclusions were reached.

Of course, Hirata-kun and the others are not at fault. Even if I had participated in the discussions, I have a strong feeling the end result wouldn’t have changed, just the steps that led to it.

“But,” I said, “this special exam might not be a one-on-one match. Ayanokoji-kun might suffer a disadvantage by giving information to Ichinose-san.”

“That won't happen.” Karuizawa-san said firmly.

“You think he wouldn’t lose, even if he gave away information?”

When I asked that back, Karuizawa-san gave a little laugh and denied it.

“If his goal for transferrin' to Class C was to pull them up to Class A with his own hands, that's kinda half-assed, right? If he was serious, he should've just gone to the bottom-ranked Class D.”

“But that’s only because Ichinose-san is there, right? After Sakayanagi-san dropped out, Class C was left without a leader. That’s the situation he stepped into.”

“If it were Ayanokoji-kun... he would have gone to Class D even if it meant getting Ichinose-san expelled.”

“That's... that's a big assumption, no matter how you look at it. Sure, if it were a special exam where expulsion was on the line, maybe someone could be targeted. But are you saying he was actually trying to get Ichinose-san expelled during the End-year exam?”

That particular exam wasn’t where you could manipulate the outcome to get someone expelled from a rival class. The structure only allowed for expulsions from within your own class.

“I don’t know how he would’ve done it,” Karuizawa-san replied. “But expelling someone doesn’t have to be limited to a special exam, does it? He could’ve done it quietly on a day like today.”

Perhaps Karuizawa-san, who dated him, thinks more highly of Ayanokoji-kun than I do. Of course, I have no intention of arguing that she’s overestimating him.

“Assuming what you said is true... then why would he transfer to Class C?”

"That, I don't know. But Ayanokoji-kun always seems to be thinking about things none of us can predict. And he probably doesn't need to rely on Ichinose-san to reach Class A. That's why, if he lent her a hand once, I just thought he might do it again."

If the lower-ranked classes team up, it will be easier to handle future exams. Was his help a strategic favor for that purpose?

I don't know his goal or the real answer. That's exactly why making assumptions is dangerous.

But even so, I need to keep this possibility in the back of my mind.

If this truly is the battlefield we're stepping into, then we need to identify the rules of this special exam, and the underlying answer, as soon as possible. Any delay starting tomorrow could prove fatal.

I'm not naive enough to believe that doing something different will magically spark a brilliant idea. Still, trying new things like this will undoubtedly prove useful down the line. Even if people say I've realized it too late, I intend to make the most of this moment of clarity.

Part 5

Ever since Ayanokoji-kun transferred out of our class, a fair amount of time had passed. But even now, the emotional wounds caused due to his departure hadn't completely healed.

The same must've been true for Karuizawa-san, who had gone shopping with me earlier.

But we've both been able to look forward and move on, more so than before.

At least now, if I happened to see Ayanokoji-kun at school, in the Keyaki Mall, or around the dorms, I could keep a straight face and pretend to stay composed.

The catalyst for my recovery was Karuizawa-san, but the other person who helped me, in her own twisted way, stood right before me now.

"For a loser, you're looking a little better, Horikita." Ibuki-san sneered the moment I opened the door to my room. It was past 6:30 p.m., and I had just gotten back from the supermarket when I heard her violent knock.

Not exactly the tone you'd expect from someone coming over to be treated to a dinner.

"All thanks to your charming flying kick. Truly grateful," I shot back dryly.

Ibuki-san puffed out her chest with exaggerated pride, clearly pleased.

"If it happens again, I'll kick you properly next time too. Better thank me in advance," she added.

I wonder if she's conveniently interpreting it in her mind as praise...

She's making me regret praising her for being even a small part of the reason I'm getting back on my feet.

No… more than that, to prevent future victims, it seems better to teach her that it's a problem in reality, rather than using sarcasm that doesn't get through.

“Kicking someone from behind like that is dangerous. I want you to promise you’ll never do it again. At the very least, not to anyone but me.”

I’d managed to avoid serious injury thanks to my martial arts training and dumb luck, but if she had hit the wrong spot, I could’ve been seriously hurt. That much, she needed to know.

But Ibuki-san just laughed, clearly not taking any of it seriously. As always.

“So you’re saying it’s fine if it's *you* ?”

“It’s not. But I won’t be getting kicked again. After all, *your* condition was ‘if it happens again,’ wasn’t it?”

Funny how the precaution I’d taken, just in case, was already paying off.

“Heeh. So you’re saying you’ve fully bounced back?”

“I can say that confidently.”

Ibuki-san, clearly not convinced, chuckled and casually kicked off her shoes as she stepped into the room. I picked up the carelessly strewn shoes and neatly aligned them beside the two pairs already arranged.

One pair belonged to me, the resident of this room.

And the other...

“Kushida, what do you think about what Horikita just said?”

Ibuki-san asked, glancing toward the owner of that second pair.

“Not a word of it,” came the immediate reply from Kushida-san, her eyes still fixed on her phone, not even sparing us a glance.

“She says she doesn't buy it,” Ibuki-san said, almost amused.

“She’s just like you, never agrees with what I say right away. So I don’t really care,” I replied with a soft sigh, moving quietly from the entrance to the kitchen.

As I unpacked the groceries I’d picked up from the Keyaki Mall supermarket from my hand bag, I turned and casually called out.

“Sit wherever you like and play with your phone like she is. I don’t mind if you watch TV either.”

“I was going to do that anyway,” Ibuki-san replied, plopping down heavily in her usual spot. Her eyes wandered around the room, casually surveying it.

Watching her from the side, Kushida-san murmured quietly, “What’s with that look on your face? It’s creepy.”

“Huh? Whose face are you calling creepy?” Ibuki-san snapped.

“There's only one person nearby, so there's no need to call them out by name, is there?”

“It could’ve been Horikita. She looks creepy too.”

“I see. Yeah, that might be true. I might have caused a misunderstanding.”

...Do these two even remember whose room they’re in?

“But just so you know, I was talking about you, Ibuki-san,” Kushida-san added nonchalantly.

“Huh? What, what? Why are you picking up a fight all of a sudden? You want me to chuck a pillow at you?” snapped Ibuki-san, who is always picking up a fight.

“It's 'cause you had a face like you were so happy to be in Horikita-san's room after so long.”

“Huh? Huh? Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not like I’m happy to be here or anything. I just felt lucky I get a free meal.”

“Isn’t that pretty much what being happy means?”

“No way in hell,”

Their noisy back-and-forth filled the room, making it livelier than it had been just moments ago. I glanced at them out of the corner of my eye as I began cooking, my hands moving smoothly from habit.

The ingredients I’d bought today had cost nearly twice my usual budget, but even then, it was cheaper than the recent days I’d spent living off convenience store meals.

Not long ago, the noisy voices of the two of them were never something I’d feel was pleasant. But now, strangely, they reached my ears like background music, calming in their own way.

Funny how even just a slight shift in your perspective can completely change how you feel inside.

As I chopped down vegetables, I found myself reflecting on my situation. A moment ago, I’d told Ibuki-san a small lie, when she asked if I’d gotten back on my feet, I’d answered with more confidence than I actually felt.

That was a lie.

I’d definitely clawed my way up from the deepest pit of despair. But to say I was fully healed? That was far from the truth.

I said those words for the sake of peace, to keep anyone else from ending up on the receiving end of Ibuki-san’s kicks.

But if I’m being honest…

I said it because I wanted to lie to myself.

To convince myself I was okay.

That's how much the reality of Ayanokoji-kun being gone is weighing on me.

Part 6

The rice cooker, which I had preset earlier, let out a cheerful *beep beep* signalling the rice was ready. I opened the lid immediately and stirred the rice with a paddle, letting the extra surface moisture escape to ensure an even texture.

Once that was done, I placed the prepared meal in front of Kushida-san and Ibuki-san.

“Hamburg steak made with *domestic* Kuroge Wagyu. Not just some generic black-haired beef, mind you.”

> **Translator’s Note:** The first sentence uses **黒毛和牛** (*kuroge wagyu*), or "Japanese Black" (*Bos primigenius*), which is one of 6 breeds of cattle native to Japan. It is highly priced, premium meat. The second sentence uses **黒毛牛** (*kuroge ushi*), which means "black cow", it refers to any meat that came from a black cattle, while "*kuroge wagyu*" needs to meet strict guidelines.

“W-What!? *Kuroge Wagyu*? T-that isn't it really verily extravagant..!”

> **Translator’s Note:** Ibuki said **結構随分と豪勢** (*kekkou zuibun to gousei*), which is a strange stacking of intensifiers. It comes off clumsy, like something a child would say. Then she closes the sentence with **じゃない** (*janai*), which adds an even more awkward tone to the sentence in this case.

Though clearly taken aback, Ibuki-san widened her hands slightly, her eyes twinkling with honest appreciation as she eyed the food.

“You were the one who insisted on eating something nice, weren’t you? Also, work on your Japanese phrasing, you sound really strange,” I added dryly as I resumed preparing the rest of the meal with practiced efficiency.

“If you're going to treat me to food like this, I'll come here every day.” Ibuki-san teased.

“Absolutely not. Today’s a rare exception,” I shot back firmly.

“You're such a cheapskate, Horikita. Oh well, I guess I’ll settle for regular meals starting tomorrow,” Ibuki-san declared, as if it were already decided.

I had no idea when she started assuming I'd continue cooking for her, but feeding into her nonsense would only inflate her ego further, so I let it slide.

At the very least, she genuinely seemed to take this as a token of appreciation and welcomed the effort I put into the meal.

The food laid out on the table carried a different atmosphere from the usual, just a little more refined, more heartfelt.

Before I noticed, even Kushida-san had paused her idle scrolling and was staring at the dishes intently.

“This... does seem kind of special—” she murmured, though her eyes were wary.

In stark contrast to the delighted Ibuki-san, Kushida-san's suspicion only deepened.

“There’s probably a catch... If we eat this without thinking, we might end up regretting it—” she began, likely meaning to warn Ibuki-san.

But by then it was already too late. Ibuki-san had her fork in hand, food en route to her mouth.

“That was fast...”

The loud sound of her shoveling the food in, echoed across the table.

You could practically hear the enthusiastic *gobble, gobble, gobble* as she dove in.

One bite leading straight to the next without pause. It was like the taste had hijacked her willpower.

Watching her eat so happily left me with a quiet sense of satisfaction.

Not a bad feeling at all, for the one who cooked it.

“Barbarian.”

“Who’re you calling a barbarian!?”

Even with her mouth still half full, Ibuki-san snapped back at Kushida-san without missing a beat.

I quietly watched them for a while, not touching my food.



Eventually, Ibuki-san lifted her head with a bright smile.

“I’ve been completely broke lately, so this kind of meal feels like luxury.”

I was curious what kind of life she was living, but that wasn’t the priority right now. After all, Ibuki-san had a habit of leaving the moment she finished eating.

“I want to hear your thoughts,” I said.

“On the food?” Ibuki-san tilted her head.

“No. About Ayanokoji-kun, the person everyone’s been talking about.”

The second his name left my lips, Ibuki-san visibly bristled. She didn’t even try to hide her disgust.

Kushida-san, by contrast, looked at me with her usual expression. But her eyes seemed to say *‘I knew it’*, as if she had picked up on the meaning behind the unusually elaborate meal.

“About him transferring classes? I think it's a bit late to talk about that now.” Kushida-san said flatly.

Did his departure really not faze her? Even though our future in Class A was now anything but secure?

“He’s our enemy now… but I still don’t know how we’re supposed to beat him,” I admitted. “I need something, anything, that could give us a breakthrough.”

“So, you’re invoking the whole ‘three heads are better than one’ proverb? Then wouldn’t Ibuki-san drag us down?”

“I'm well aware of that.” I replied plainly.

At that, Ibuki-san lightly smacked her clenched fist, still holding her fork, onto the table.

“I know you are making fun of me. Wanna get kicked?”

“I might be mocking you a little,” I admitted, “but I *do* intend to rely on you. Especially for this topic… I’m actually hoping you’ll say something unexpected. After all, you’ve never really liked Ayanokoji-kun, have you?”

“Hmph, I see,” she said with a slight nod, accepting my twisted reasoning.

“You really shouldn't just accept it like that, Ibuki-san… But whatever.”

Ibuki-san grabbed her fork again, shoveling a huge spoonful of rice into her mouth. After chewing and swallowing thoroughly, she let out another snort. She began spinning her fork in a very unladylike manner as she gave a firm nod.

“Take down Ayanokoji, hmm? Impossible.”

“You are giving up too easily, I want you to think about it a little more.”

“I *am* thinking. But the guy’s a monster, crazy strong. Even ambushes don’t work. If he were someone who seemed beatable, I’d be fired up to take him down next time, but… he’s way beyond that. I’ve been made to understand it. That’s why I’ve already given up.”

It's impressive to get someone who likes fighting as much as Ibuki-san, to say something like that. As expected of Ayanokoji-kun.. But that’s not really the issue here.

“You’re only thinking about defeating him in a physical sense, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Is there another way?”

Anyone with common sense would immediately realize that it’s not just a physical contest, but one of intellect too. Still, this is just another unique way of thinking, something only Ibuki-san could come up with, and I decided to accept it with a positive mindset.

“Well, maybe approaching it from that angle first isn’t such a bad idea after all.”

That’s the kind of discussion we can have only because it’s Ibuki-san sitting here.

“Actually, lemme ask you the real question: Do you at least know the secret behind his strength?” Ibuki-san asked me.

“The secret to his strength…?”

“Neither you nor me can match him in physical strength. Even that Albert guy looked like a little kid in front of Ayanokoji. Pure power-wise, Ayanokoji shouldn’t have had a chance… and yet, he made Albert look like nothing.”

The fork that had been lazily spinning in her fingers came to a stop. She gripped it tightly, her expression hardening.

The secret behind his strength… Just when, and where, did he gain such overwhelming power? No, it wasn’t just strength. His intellect, too, was clearly far beyond what you’d expect from a high school student.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know anything,” I murmured. “…He never told me a thing.”

Even though I’d been the one closest to him… I couldn't help but murmur that bit of self-mockery.

“You're no help, huh. I always thought of you and Ayanokoji as a pair.”

It was a painful remark, one I had no comeback for.

Honestly, I just wanted to cover my ears and run away from the pitiful image of myself that it reflected.

But even so, I’m slowly coming to terms with it.

Every time Ayanokoji-kun's name comes up, I can't help but feel a similar mix of emotions. I'm finally starting to accept that it's just something I can't avoid anymore.

“I don’t really get what makes someone strong in a fight, but that means Ayanokoji-kun must have something that surpasses Yamada-kun, besides muscle, I mean, right? Yamada-kun’s obviously stronger physically.” Kushida-san tilted her head slightly as she spoke.

“Well, if you want me to put it into words…”

Ibuki-san trailed off and gave me a look, clearly tossing the rest of the explanation into my lap.

“In his case, it’s not about training or fighting styles. He’s just… beyond that.”

Normally, the road to becoming strong is the same for everyone. You train, specialize in a field— karate, judo, etc, and hone your technique through years of discipline.

I explained this to Kushida-san.

“If only we knew the core foundation that makes him so refined…”

Even someone with natural talent needs years to become a master.

I haven’t witnessed as much as Ibuki-san, but during the encounter with Hosen-kun and the Mixed training camp, I saw fragments of that strength with my own eyes.

And maybe it’s precisely because I’ve practiced martial arts myself that my brain refuses to accept it. That someone could reach such a level, as just a high school senior?

It doesn’t make any sense.

“Did he learn those skills after coming to this school, or had he already mastered them before that?”

“No way he picked them up here. By the winter of our first year, he was already monstrously strong. There’s no place here where you can train like that. Idiot Kushida.”

“Hey, listen. Unlike you two, I don’t have a muscle-brain, okay? It’s normal not to know anything about barbaric stuff. Anyway, do you ever think maybe he just started martial arts before elementary school or around then and that’s all there is to it?”

“Martial arts are no different from studying, Kushida-san. You can’t just pour in time and expect to get strong. No matter how much you study, being number one is still hard. Training alone doesn’t guarantee superiority.”

I spent my entire elementary and middle school life studying endlessly, all for the sake of being number one.

And truthfully, back in middle school, I was at least in the top three of my grade.

But once I entered Advanced Nurturing High School, I lost that position without even putting up a fight.

I could maintain a high rank, but getting to first place? That became a whole different story.

And when I go on to university, I’ll probably face the same fate again. With exceptional students pouring in from all over the country, my position will inevitably slip.

It’s a repeating cycle, one that effort alone can’t overcome.

“Then, there is only one possible answer. '*Who is the strongest in this school?*' and '*Who is the smartest in this school?*'.

Ayanokoji-kun was simply a genius who qualified for both of those spots from the very beginning.”

Yes, If you don't think too deeply about it, that is the answer you arrive at.

He’s not just one of those diligent or smart students you find every school year, he’s someone with genuine, exceptional talent.

The kind of person who could stay at the top even at Japan’s most prestigious schools and universities. There’s no doubt Ayanokoji-kun is one of those rare individuals.

“To be frank, that may be the case,” I admitted. “But even so, it still doesn’t feel real to me. I’ve met plenty of people who were more capable than I am, and yet... he’s different. It’s like he’s standing in a place no one else can reach.”

–I feel like I've given him an overly high evaluation, something akin to a deity.

But maybe, for now, I’ll let myself think of him that way. And if it turns out he’s just a top 10–20% student? Well, that would still be reassuring in its own way.

After a brief pause, I recalled something that had happened not too long ago.

“I wanted to know more about his background, so I actually went to meet Ayanokoji-kun’s father during the three-way parent-teacher conference.”

Kushida-san, who had shown almost no interest during our earlier discussion of martial arts, suddenly leaned in, looking intrigued.

“Ayanokoji-kun’s? What kind of person was he?”

“I’m curious too. Was he some gorilla-like powerhouse or something?”

Ibuki-san leaned in eagerly, eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Well,” I said, “you might actually be disappointed to hear it. He seemed a little stern at first glance, but honestly, he was just a calm, ordinary man. He even said there wasn’t anything unusual about how he raised his son.”

"No way. That has to be a lie. Unless he turned his kid into a cyborg or something, it just doesn't make sense," Ibuki-san declared, slurping her miso soup loudly as she threw out the absurd idea.

"That said, I didn't get the impression that he was lying."

"But we're talking about *Ayanokoji-kun's* parent. Isn't it weirder to assume he'd actually tell the truth?"

"...Yeah, you're probably right."`

It made sense, there's no way someone turns out like that from normal education alone. Even with top-tier elite training, he still feels like someone who exists in a realm out of reach.

Maybe his father lied just to avoid sounding like he was boasting about his son.

"Speaking of which... do you think there's anyone in this school who went to the same middle school as Ayanokoji-kun?"

"Who knows? I've tried asking him about that a few times, but he always managed to dodge the question."

"Normally, people don't hesitate to share which school they came from. The fact that he won't... well, it kind of suggests he's hiding something,"

It certainly sounds convincing coming from Kushida-san, who wanted to keep what happened in her middle school a secret.

After all, unless there's something inconvenient to reveal, there's usually no reason to hide such a basic fact.

"Do you think Ayanokoji-kun is good at sports too, beyond just fighting? I mean, he was really fast," Kushida-san added.

“I'm not sure.” I replied thoughtfully “I didn’t think much of it at the beginning, but now that we know he’s been deliberately scoring low on written exams… he might’ve been holding back in sports as well.”

“So even if we found out what club he was in during middle school, there’s still a chance he was hiding his true ability there too?”

“Yes. If he was outstandingly talented in a particular sport, then regardless of which prefecture he is from, someone is bound to have heard rumors about him…” I said

“I just tried searching his name,” Kushida-san said, scrolling through her phone, “but nothing’s coming up. I thought his rare last name would narrow it down, but there’s no record of any achievements from his elementary or middle school days. Just unrelated celebrities and politicians.”

Apparently, before he entered high school, Ayanokoji-kun was the kind of student who, for better or worse, left no footprint on the world.

Although what we’ve uncovered could technically be considered a clue, it didn’t feel like any real progress had been made. What we needed was someone with a genuine lead, which connected back to Ayanokoji-kun.

“That guy... he looked like he knew something, didn’t he?” Ibuki-san murmured, recollecting a past incident.

Almost at the same time, I found myself remembering the same person she referred to.

“What was his name again? Uhh, let's see... one year below me…”

“Yagami, Yagami Takuya-kun.” I recalled

"That's right— Yagami. He was seriously messed up. Caused all kinds of chaos. Didn't he beat up Komiya and the others on that deserted island? I think he also said something about Ayanokoji back then?"

As Ibuki-san and I reminisced about Yagami-kun, Kushida-san, who had been listening quietly, seemed to stiffen up at the mention of his name.

Cornered in the student council room by Nagumo-senpai, Ryuen-kun, and the teachers, Yagami-kun was expelled for assaulting someone during the deserted island exam.

At that time, I had a thought that someone else was behind that setup. A quiet suspicion that Ayanokoji-kun had been the mastermind. But now, that buried suspicion was beginning to stir again.

"Amasawa showed up at the end, didn't she? And those strange adults in black suits barged in too."

"That's right.. I think they said they were acquaintances of Yagami-kun and Amasawa-san. My memory is a bit hazy, but I'm sure I heard that much."

Yagami-kun and his group had been plotting to get Ayanokoji-kun expelled.

But in turn, it appears Ayanokoji-kun had turned the tables, luring Yagami-kun using a trap, hidden in a letter.

The only confirmed link so far is that Yagami-kun and Amasawa-san are connected. But any connection to Ayanokoji-kun remains uncertain.

"Yagami, Amasawa, and Ayanokoji— could they have gone to the same middle school? Or maybe they've been acquaintances since way back? That seems more than possible. Try looking up Yagami and Amasawa too"

“Already did. No hits, unfortunately,” Kushida-san replied, turning her phone screen toward us.

That moment jogged a memory I hadn’t even realized I’d forgotten.

“Wait. Come to think of it, Yagami-kun went to the same middle school as me…”

“Huh? Really? Then he has nothing to do with Ayanokoji.. Why didn't you remember sooner?”

“Can you blame me? I didn’t even know him back then. But Kushida-san… you did.”

Kushida-san, who had been listening quietly up to this point, gently put down her phone onto the table.

“You went to the same middle school as me. And you knew Yagami-kun. Isn’t that right, Kushida-san?”

“So Idiot Kushida is at fault here. Spit it out already.”

“Yagami-kun… huh,” Kushida-san murmured, her voice low and unreadable. Then she continued, calmly and without hesitation.

“Well, since Ayanokoji-kun transferred classes, there is no point in keeping this a secret anymore, so I'll let you know. Yagami-kun and I didn't go to the same middle school at all.”

“Huh?!”

“What? Wait— what do you mean? This is getting seriously confusing,” Ibuki-san blurted out, her voice tinged with frustration.

I felt the same disorientation wash over me. I remembered it clearly, shortly after the first-years had enrolled last year, Yagami-kun had visited the second-year classrooms, he and Kushida-san had exchanged words that seemed to confirm they’d been schoolmates in middle school. There was no reason to doubt that, and I believed it without question.

Now that entire premise came crashing down.

Kushida-san went on to explain.

Students of that school knew her true nature. Although she had no memory of a junior named Yagami Takuya, he clearly showed signs that indicated *he* certainly knew *her*.

Fearing that denying any connection might provoke him to reveal her past, she'd reflexively lied, claiming they were from the same school, just to play along, so she could figure out just how much Yagami-kun knew about her.

But the result was worse than anything she had expected.

Yagami-kun hadn't gone to her school at all, yet somehow he knew everything about her past, down to the ugliest truths. And in exchange for keeping those secrets buried, he began demanding her cooperation in all sorts of ways.

Apparently, Amasawa-san had been involved in it as well.

"Ho– Hold on a moment. This is too much information to process. I knew Yagami-kun was smart, but... was he really not your junior?"

"It was right after I looked at the new students' OAA, so I just remembered him a little. His Academic Ability was an A, so it stuck in my mind. It'd be troublesome if a junior from the same middle school came here, like Horikita-san did, right? So once I had access, I checked all the faces and names."

She went on to confess that she'd cleverly used that detail about Yagami-kun's academic score to pretend they were acquaintances.

"I don't know how much certainty Horikita-san and the others had," Kushida-san said, suddenly cutting in, "but I can tell you for sure— Ayanokoji-kun is the one who got Yagami-kun expelled."

She addressed the very question Ibuki-san and I had been struggling to answer definitively.

“I asked Ayanokoji-kun directly after Yagami-kun was expelled. He said he only dealt with him to protect me since I was being used. Apparently, they weren’t from the same school, but they knew each other. Same with Amasawa-san, he said she used to live nearby.”

“You should've said this sooner, really Idiot Kushida.”

“It's a past I've kept locked away, not something I want to talk about that freely.” Kushida-san replied quietly.

“Damn, to think someone so close had all the answers we were looking for.”

“Exactly… I understand your reasons, but this really is the definition of ‘hiding in plain sight.’” I added

It felt as if the structure I’d painstakingly built in my mind had been knocked over in one swift motion, shattered by an unseen hand from the side.

“Ayanokoji-kun once said he earned their resentment,” Kushida-san began, recalling the conversation as best she could. “Amasawa-san forgave him, I think… maybe it was all a misunderstanding that got cleared up. But Yagami-kun didn’t. He apparently dug up my past as part of his revenge against Ayanokoji-kun… or at least, that’s how I remember it.”

“I never thought I’d tell this story to anyone else… but you never know how things turn out, do you?”

she added with a wry smile, then took a small sip of water, perhaps parched after finally speaking of a truth she had kept buried.

“I might’ve forced you to recall something unpleasant,” I said, “but this is a major revelation. We’ll have to go back and reorganize everything from the beginning…”

Kiyotaka Ayanokoji— a person whose background still remains cloaked in mystery.

It was now undeniable that he shared a connection with both Amasawa-san and Yagami-kun who possessed some extraordinary abilities themselves. It seems unlikely they were just casual acquaintances.

Somewhere along the way, he earned their resentment.

“Middle school? Or maybe even earlier— childhood?”

Something must have happened back then…

And so, I begin to reconstruct everything from scratch, piece by piece, in my mind.

“I don’t really know much about martial arts,” Kushida-san began hesitantly, “but aren’t there nationally renowned dojos for karate or judo? Isn’t it possible he trained at one of those?”

“Idiot Kushida. This isn’t the kind of strength you get easily at a place like that.”

“I *did* preface by saying I didn’t know martial arts, didn’t I?” Kushida-san shot back with a tight smile. “Just because it doesn’t align with your understanding, doesn’t give you the right to lash out. You’re only making a fool of yourself. And could you stop calling me ‘idiot’ every time you open your mouth? You and I aren’t even in the same league when it comes to grades, you wouldn’t even be able to compete.”

Kushida-san sighed and added, “I was just offering one perspective, from the point of view of a normal person.”

“Hmph. Anyone with common sense should at least know the basics of martial arts,” Ibuki-san scoffed.

“Yeah, well, that’s not exactly common sense,” Kushida-san retorted dryly.

"Alright, no fighting," I interjected. "But it's true, even attending a renowned dojo wouldn't give you the kind of skills Ayanokoji-kun has. If anything, maybe it was the other way around. They were scouted by a famous dojo *because* of their skills, and that's how they ended up meeting. That might be a more plausible theory."

My mind drifted back to the adults who had arrived to retrieve Yagami-kun after his rampage in the student council room. If they were connected to his background, the web of connections might slowly begin to reveal itself.

"Maybe I should try speaking to Amasawa-san directly sometime soon," I mused out loud

"You seriously think that little devil's going to spill anything?" came the snide reply.

"That may be so... but what about you two?" I asked, glancing at them both.

"I'm going to pass," came the first response, curt and uninterested.

"If I see Amasawa's face, I'll want to punch it. So no, I'm not going," said the other, irritation flashing clearly.

Both of them rejected the idea almost simultaneously, without the slightest hesitation.

Honestly, they had a point. Recklessly confronting her probably wouldn't get us anywhere.

Maybe it was wiser to hold back for now— and just observe how things played out.

Part 7

Ibuki-san, having eaten her fill, was the first to leave. Kushida-san followed a couple of minutes later, slipping on her shoes at the entrance. I assumed she would walk out without so much as a glance back.

But—

“Thanks for the meal today. I appreciate it,” she said.

“...You're still better than some people. At least you can say thank you properly.”

“It's not like this is about you–” Kushida-san added with a breezy smile. “Honestly, I don’t really feel like thanking anyone. But I guess it’s just a habit. I try to make a point of expressing things in words, so it sort of slips out without me noticing.”

She said it so casually, like even that remark had come from her unconscious habit of courtesy.

“I see... Well, regardless of how you really feel, words do matter,” I murmured.

Despite the fact that her gratitude was nothing more than a formality, I found myself somewhat satisfied with it.

I had assumed she would leave immediately, but for some reason, she turned back to face me.

“By the way, are things regarding the special exam going well? Do you have any idea what the rules might be?”

“I'm narrowing down the possibilities. I plan on announcing some guidelines to the class tomorrow.”

This sort of discussion wasn’t possible with Ibuki-san from the rival class present.

Maybe that's why Kushida-san had deliberately decided to linger and leave a bit later.

"Even though she is just Ibuki-san, be careful around her."

"Honestly, there wasn't even a need to be. I stayed alert during dinner, thinking she might try to get a read on our strategy for the test. But she didn't even seem to consider it. It probably never even crossed her mind."

There is no doubt she came to my room with the sole purpose of eating.

Even so, Kushida-san made a point to steer the conversation away from anything sensitive, just to be safe. That kind of discretion… I genuinely appreciated it.

"We don't even know the rules yet. Are you still planning to win this special exam?"

"You surprised me, asking that. Of course I am. The same conditions apply to every class."

"But Class C has Ayanokoji-kun."

Her sharp eyes met mine, eyes that cut straight through the facade, striking the heart of the matter without hesitation.

It felt as though my mental fortitude was being tested all over again.

"It's strange, isn't it? Back when we first entered this school, I couldn't have imagined it at all. But now, just hearing his name makes my body instinctively tense up... I'm afraid and in awe of him, I can't even see him as someone I could possibly defeat."

I let out a quiet sigh, acknowledging the truth I could no longer hide. My own weakness stared me in the face.

"But we fight anyway, believing we can win. Isn't that the bare minimum we need?" I asked.

“Maybe so,” Kushida-san replied, averting her eyes from mine for a moment.

“I thought reaching Class A would finally let me breathe a little, maybe even bask in the victory for once. But here we are, scrambling to survive— like rabbits being chased by lions. If we keep losing like this, things will end badly.”

Kushida-san, who always carried herself as an honor student with pride, cared deeply about appearances. She had never voiced it outright, but being cast into Class D must have gnawed at her from within. She hated being anything less than perfect.

Then came the unanimous special exam— the day her carefully hidden true self was dragged into the light. Her world had shifted completely.

Now she was forced to work alongside people she despised, myself included. She had to keep fighting, even while bleeding from the wounds she suffered along the way.

Class A, a position she had finally grasped with everything she had, now felt as though it was slipping through her fingers.

The stress must be unimaginable.

“No matter how you look at it, Horikita-san alone isn’t going to be enough.”

“I.. can't deny that, even if I wanted to.” I admitted, unable to refute the truth.

“Anyway, if you come across anything that might be a hint for the special exam, let me know. I'll think things through from there, in my own way.”

“Of course,” she said with a nod. Then, after a small pause, her tone shifted.

Even as she aired her frustrations without restraint, Kushida-san still showed a surprising willingness to help.

"I didn't expect you to offer your support," I said honestly. "I guess you really do have a kind side."

I meant it as a compliment, but she only let out a quiet snort through her nose. Her smile stayed frozen, her eyes strangely still.

"I just love the version of myself who *pretends* to be kind. I know full well that I've got a terrible personality. That's why I can act like an angel even to someone like Horikita-san. Anyway... let's hope you're not just some storm in a teacup."

With a small, dismissive laugh, she opened the front door and walked out.

"...So that's how it is," I murmured. "Looks like I still can't read people very well."

But I wasn't disappointed. If anything, I was impressed.

Kushida-san had shown me a way of living— one meticulously shaped around her outward image, as if performance was her reality.

And long after she left, her final words stayed with me, echoing in the back of my mind.

"I hope you're not just some storm in a teacup."

"—I'm hoping for that too."

After the door closed, I let out a breath and made my way back into the living room.

A new special exam begins tomorrow.

But today has its own responsibilities, so rest will have to wait a little longer.

"Well then... I'd better clean up."

Suppressing the slight sense of reluctance, I turned my gaze to the table.

Kushida-san, as always, ate with elegance and poise.

But what caught me by surprise... was Ibuki-san.

While it's common for people to leave behind grains of rice, she had finished every single one without leaving a trace.

That alone is certainly praiseworthy.

That said...

"That's the only thing I can praise her for, everything else is a mess."

Spilled miso soup and scattered scraps of food littered not only the table, but even the seat where she had been sitting.

Her uniform skirt was probably stained too.

I wish she'd develop at least a little awareness that her daily manners are being observed—

Just as I reached out, I froze.

A sudden thought came to mind.

"I see... That kind of possibility is entirely within reason..."

A week-long special exam imposed by the school.... with no explanation of the rules.

Was she talking about this past week, or the one to come? I still didn't have the answer.

That uncertainty was surely weighing on every class, leaving them equally lost in thought.

"—The chances aren't low," I murmured.

Chabashira-sensei's tone, her actions, her very demeanor—

What if all of it had been her way of giving us a hint? A desperate, subtle message meant just for us?

As if she wanted to see that we'd grown since our first day here.

Those cold words of hers— they weren't just warnings. They were her honest feelings, born from watching how immature we had once been.

If the thoughts that have surfaced in my mind are correct, I have to act— today. Without delay.

Especially because whether or not *that person* can be brought under control by tomorrow... will decide everything.

Part 8

It was a little after 8 PM when I rushed out of my room and made my way downstairs via the elevator.

In front of Sudo-kun's door, I took a deep breath, calmed my racing heart, and gave a gentle knock.

Moments later, I heard hurried footsteps approach from within, followed by the door opening with a somewhat rough jerk.

"What the— who the hell's knocking at this hour…?"

There stood Sudo-kun, still in his school uniform with only his blazer removed.

He was wearing glasses, a rare sight, which gave him an unexpectedly fresh look.

"Sorry for showing up unannounced," I said. "I just need to talk to you for a bit."

"S-S-Suzune?! W-What are you doing here—n-no, not that it's a problem or anything!"

He flailed his arms in a panicked frenzy, and I noticed a mechanical pencil tightly gripped in his hand.

"Huh? Horikita-san?"

From behind a bewildered Sudo-kun, a familiar voice rang out, and Onodera-san poked her head into view.

My eyes flicked instinctively to the entryway. Two pairs of shoes sat neatly by the door— enough to invite at least a bit of suspicion, even from me.

"Did I come at a bad time?"

"N-not at all! You're not interrupting anything!" Sudo-kun blurted, flustered. "We were just studying together, that's all!"

“Studying?”

True to his words, he wore his glasses and held a mechanical pencil in hand. Both of them were still in their school uniforms.

From the standpoint of the student council president, I had no issues to point out.

“Well... you know,” he continued awkwardly, “this whole special exam thing... they said we didn’t need to study yet, but if it turns out to be a written test, we’re screwed, right? So I figured I’d prepare a little. Just in case.”

I hadn't even announced tomorrow’s policy, yet he had already taken the initiative to prepare. No one would have expected this from him back when he first enrolled.

“That’s admirable and all, but make sure you get Onodera-san back to her room safely before curfew, alright?”

“Obviously I will! But seriously, what are you even doing here without a word?”

He tried to shoo Onodera-san toward the living room with a wave of his hand, but I stopped him. If there was already a guest present, it would be faster to have them hear the situation directly rather than explain it twice.

“Mind if I step in for just a moment? I’d rather this not be overheard by students from other classes.”

“Oh... yeah, of course.”

I stepped just inside the entrance and quietly closed the door behind me. Then, turning to Onodera-san, who was watching me with curious eyes, I beckoned her over toward the entrance.

“About the special exam starting tomorrow... I can't be certain, but I have a theory about how it might work.”

Lowering my voice just a bit, I began to explain it to the two of them.

“Seriously? What kind of rules do you think it'll have?” Onodera-san asked, eyes narrowing in curiosity.

“Didn’t Chabashira-sensei seem colder than usual when she announced it?” I replied.

“Yeah, Kanji and the others were complaining about that. They were trying to come up with all sorts of reasons for her behavior.”

“But I don’t think it was because she was stressed or overwhelmed. I believe… she acted cold on purpose.”

“Huh, on purpose? What's the point? Wouldn't you just end up being hated?,”

“I interpreted that as a subtle hint for us.. I think she wanted to remind us of the time we first enrolled here.”

“You mean our first year, right? Yeah, back then she was seriously cold,” Sudo-kun replied, glancing back and meeting Onodera-san’s eyes. A brief moment passed as they both dug through their memories, then nodded in agreement.

“Do you remember what our first special exam was when we were in Class 1-D?”

“Hmm? Wasn’t it that deserted island test?” Onodera-san murmured as she stepped forward, now standing beside Sudo-kun.

“Onodera-san is, strictly speaking, correct. But there was a certain month-long exam we were subjected to right after enrollment, an exam where the rules were not explained. That was the beginning of everything, the reason we ended up struggling for two whole years.”

As soon as I finished, Sudo-kun’s eyes lit up with realization, and Onodera-san quickly followed suit.

"Oh, right! It was stuff like being late, skipping class, or not behaving properly during lessons. They were watching all of that, and we ended up losing all our class points, didn't we?"

It had been a surprise from the school, handing each of us, fresh-faced first-years, points equivalent to a hundred thousand yen every month. We were just kids, dazzled by the generosity. And so, without ever questioning the true intent behind it, we indulged in it. Tardiness, chatter during class, things we assumed harmless. The teachers never scolded us. They simply watched in silence.

And Class D, blissfully unaware of the trap laid beneath their feet, reveled in the illusion of privilege.

The price we paid was huge— one that led directly into the two grueling years I had just spoken of.

"So this is that same test again, huh?" Sudo-kun muttered, frowning. "Come to think of it, she did say something about showing how much we've grown… Was that her way of telling us not to repeat our past mistakes?"

He had been listening carefully to Chabashira-sensei, and now, piecing her words together on his own, he was starting to catch on.

"That's how I interpreted it," I said plainly. "Which is why I believe this might be another special exam, one that follows a similar set of rules."

"Seems reasonable." Onodera-san chimed in, her expression showing a click of understanding. "Or rather, if you put it that way, it seems like the only logical conclusion."

"Of course," I continued, "there's still a chance it's a completely different kind of test, with unrelated rules. We can't ignore that possibility. But even so, we crammed hard for the last special exam, and there's been a noticeable build-up of frustration among our classmates. There's no guarantee we'll get good results if we keep going like this."

There probably aren't many students who can keep their motivation as high as these two.

"To be honest, this kind of strategy, where we try to prepare for both possibilities, doesn't really suit our class,"

"It's definitely easier when you can focus on just one thing."

"Of course, it's a gamble," I added, "If they tell us on the day that it's a written exam, we might be completely screwed. But even so..."

"I don't know what Sudo-kun thinks, but I kind of want to go with Horikita-san's plan. Studying isn't a bad idea, sure, but when you push yourself too hard, your efficiency drops. A simple, straightforward strategy might just be the most effective way for the class to win. That's what I think, anyway."

"Yes. I plan on sharing this with the class today and have everyone adopt a strict, disciplined lifestyle starting tomorrow. A single tardy might be the difference between victory and defeat."

Ayanokoji-kun and Ichinose-san's classes are filled with model students.

They naturally maintain a high standard of behavior— no tardiness, no absences, even without consciously trying.

For us, even a single misstep at the beginning could prove to be fatal.

"Then we have to make sure this doesn't leak out. If Kanji and the others let it slip on accident, we'd suffer a serious blow."

"That's right. Whether or not we manage to get a lead on the first day is a crucial factor."

Regardless of the other classes, there is no way Ayanokoji-kun wouldn't have anticipated this much.

Class C has almost certainly accounted for this scenario already.

And as Karuizawa-san fears, that information may very well have trickled down to Class D as well...

"...Ayanokoji might've already seen through everything."

Even without me voicing my thoughts, it seemed Sudo-kun had reached the same conclusion.

That in itself was proof enough, he understood just how formidable an opponent Ayanokoji-kun truly was.

"Still, we can't be sure about the other classes. Will you cooperate with me?"

"Yeah," he nodded, thumping his chest with a loud *don* and standing upright. "I've got a pretty good idea how to make those guys follow the rules and keep their mouths shut."

That confidence of his was oddly reassuring.

"But just keeping Ike-kun and the others under control won't cut it," I said, my tone turning more serious. "There's a bigger issue—one major obstacle in our class."

"An obstacle...? Oh, I get it. That's why you came here, right, Suzune?" Sudo-kun quickly caught on.

The same image flickered in both Onodera-san and Sudo-kun's minds, a certain troublemaker who never listens to anyone.

"He's not the kind of student who skips class or shows up late for no reason. But when it comes to how he behaves in class, or how he lives his life, he's a walking problem. If he slips up, even once, our chances of winning go down to zero."

To survive this special exam, gaining his cooperation wasn't just important, it was absolutely essential.

"But isn't it impossible? Getting that guy to follow instructions?"

“Just asking him straight up won’t work,” I admitted. “But I do have a plan. That’s why I’m thinking of paying a visit to Koenji-kun’s room. But I’ve never been there before. So I’d like someone from our class to come with me, just in case.”

“Going to Koenji's room now? That's definitely dangerous.” Sudo-kun replied. “If that guy goes wild, even I won’t be able to stop him easily. You're right about not going alone.”

That wasn’t exactly what I was worried about, but...

I didn’t feel like digging into that weird line of thought, so I just let it slide.

“So, would it be alright if I borrowed Sudo-kun for a bit?” I asked. “I’ll return him in ten, maybe twenty minutes max.”

“Fine by me. You go do your thing, I'll just wait around.” Onodera-san gave her approval.

Sudo-kun too readily agreed, and we both quickly slipped on our shoes and stepped out into the hallway together.

Part 9

We finally reached Koenji-kun's room, and without hesitation, Sudo-kun stepped up to take the lead, knocking assertively on the door.

No response came from the other side.

“Is he not back yet...?” I wondered aloud.

I had assumed he’d be in his room at this hour. Perhaps I’d been too optimistic.

“No idea,” Sudo-kun muttered. “That guy’s the type to ignore anything annoying. Wouldn’t be surprised if he’s pretending not to hear.”

Saying that, he then repeatedly knocked on the door somewhat forcefully. The fact that he can do stuff I'd hesitate doing without a second thought really is helpful.

After a few moments of echoing knocks that disturbed the quiet hallway, the door creaked open at last.

“Yo, Koenji. Knew you were in there,” Sudo-kun said with a smirk.

“Oh dear. I was wondering what kind of idiot it might be, turns out it’s just a classmate,” Koenji-kun replied with his usual flamboyance.

“Sorry for barging in so late,” I said, stepping forward. “I have a simple favor to ask.”

“If you wanted an appointment, wouldn’t it have been easier to call me?” Koenji-kun said, his voice laced with his usual arrogance.

“There is no guarantee I'd be able to reach you on your phone, and I couldn’t risk waiting until tomorrow. Besides, I figured you wouldn't listen to me unless I met you in person. It's about the special exam.”

“Ah, so that’s what this is. Still clinging to hope, are you, Horikita-girl?” he said, mock amusement dancing in his eyes. “I thought our little chat earlier would’ve been enough for you to understand your place.”

“You don’t have to attend the discussion, nor do you have to carry the class’s burden alone. But what if this request benefits you personally? Wouldn’t that make it worth hearing out?” My tone remained composed, but firm. “If you just listen, I promise it won’t be a bad deal.”

I didn’t like the idea of constantly dangling carrots in front of a horse that refused to budge.

But I couldn't say that to his face.

“Hmm. In that case, I suppose I’ll hear you out a little,” he said.

Before we could even respond, he swung the door wide open.

“It'd be hard to talk if our voices got carried outside, wouldn’t it?” he added, as if he'd already pieced something together from our mention of the special exam earlier. Without hesitation, he welcomed us into the entryway.

“Didn’t expect the day would come when I’d be stepping into your room,” Sudo-kun muttered, half in disbelief.

“Fufufu. Rejoice, Red Hair-kun,” Koenji-kun said with a theatrical chuckle. “You’re the very first man to ever set foot in my room.”

“Not even a little bit happy about this...” Sudo-kun muttered with a grimace, even making a theatrical gagging motion. Then, arms crossed with exaggerated seriousness, he stepped half a pace ahead of me, as if taking the lead in some dramatic negotiation.

“Well, let's hear what you have to say.” he said coolly. “I take it this is something that’ll benefit me?”

"Yes," I replied calmly. "Starting tomorrow, I want you to come to school like you're supposed to, no absences, no showing up late. And no talking nonsense during class."

His brow twitched, but I continued. "On top of that, I want you to fix your posture in class, keep those wandering hands still, and stop causing trouble at places like the Keyaki Mall. Just for one week."

Of course, this was all just a request, one I knew full well wouldn't sway someone like Koenji-kun. He was never going to agree on good will alone. That's why I wasted no time moving on to the part that really mattered:

The part that would benefit him.

"Just like the rest of your classmates, if you can go a full week without causing any trouble, I'll pay you two hundred thousand private points," I said

It was practically two hundred thousand yen for simply behaving yourself for seven days. There was no denying, it was a ludicrously generous reward.

Sudo-kun shot me a look that clearly said, *Isn't that way too much?*

But anything less wouldn't move someone like Koenji-kun. He needed a reward with impact.

In fact, if he started complaining that it wasn't enough, I was fully prepared to raise the offer up to three hundred thousand.

"So, Horikita-girl believes that upholding discipline is the true rule of this exam?" he asked, that ever-theatrical smirk dancing on his face.

"Yes," I replied without hesitation.

"What a coincidence, I had reached the same conclusion myself."

"...That really is a coincidence," I said, narrowing my eyes. "Mind telling me how you got there?"

“Probably the same way you did. From the teacher's attitude.”

Unlike me, who had only realized it moments ago, Koenji-kun might have seen through it much earlier. I was tempted to ask him for details, but I refrained from doing so.

“However,” he continued, “the world is full of surprises. As things stand, there’s about a 70% chance this exam is designed to test our discipline.”

Then he smiled slyly. “Even so, if it turns out to be completely unrelated, or you lose for reasons unrelated to me, I’ll still expect you to pay me the full amount of private points. Are you okay with that?”

“What!? That’s ridiculous!” Sudo-kun exclaimed.

“There’s nothing more expensive than something that’s free,” Koenji-kun said with a smirk. “If you can’t accept those terms, I’m afraid I won’t be offering any help at all.”

“I figured you’d say that,” I said calmly. “I’m willing to accept your condition, but I expect you to avoid any behavior that would result in even a single point deduction.”

A sly laugh escaped his lips. “Fufufu. Then we have a deal. For the next week, I’ll sell you my discipline... for the generous price of 500,000 private points.”

“...That's quite a high price you're asking for. I can’t believe you’re serious about negotiating with that amount.”

“This is me being generous, you know?” he said, flashing a grin. “Not being able to check my bangs in class with a hand mirror, it’s agony for someone like me who lives in pursuit of beauty. Besides, I’m not the type who enjoys dancing around each other’s intentions. I prefer to close a deal in one shot.”

That single remark of his made it painfully clear, he had seen right through me. He knew I hadn't placed a 200,000-point cap. Just like after school, he didn't miss a chance to strike where it hurt most.

"Now that's seriously pushing it. You think just because you've got leverage, you can make outrageous demands—"

I held back Sudo-kun, who looked like he was about to lunge, and cut him off mid-sentence.

"I trust you understand that forcing your own self-centered logic on others is just as unreasonable, right?"

"Naturally," he replied with an exaggerated sigh. "Though I must say, the sight of my beautiful long legs resting on the desk will be sorely missed starting tomorrow. A tragedy, really... but unavoidable."

"...Are you sure Suzune? Five hundred thousand private points is just—"

"The deal is done," I interrupted flatly. "And not a word of this contract is to leave this room."

This was a gamble. Just as Koenji-kun pointed out, there's no guarantee that abiding by school rules is even part of the special exam's criteria. If the odds are at 70%, that's already the best we can hope for.

But right now, I have to act on the belief that I can sway the probability in our favor. Without the resolve to take that level of risk, we'll never come out ahead of the other classes.

More than anything, the Koenji-kun standing before me would never budge for something ordinary. If I had asked something only he could do, like acing the test or dominating in sports, there wouldn't even have been a seat at the negotiation table.

But this time, it's the opposite: all I want... is for him to *do nothing*.

Although it was expensive, at the very least he accepted my proposal.

“Well then, you should be on your way. I still have a long night ahead of me. Or…” He smirked, turning to me. “Perhaps, Horikita-girl would like to accompany me for the night? I promise you won’t regret it.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! Let’s go, Suzune,” Sudo-kun snapped, grabbing my arm. Without giving the man another second of our time, he pulled me out into the hallway.

“Damn that bastard… saying such ridiculous things,” he muttered under his breath as we waited at the elevator.

“It's just a silly joke, don't worry about it. Besides, negotiations went well.”

“But still, 500,000 points for doing nothing is way too much, don't you think?”

“If the other students caught wind of this, they’d no doubt raise complaints,” I said calmly, then quickly reassured him. “But don’t worry. I have no intention of making anyone else in the class shoulder the cost of these private points.”

“That’s not what I meant…” Sudo-kun replied, awkwardly scratching his head. “Even if it’s all out of your own pocket, there’ll still be people who won’t be okay with this proposal if they hear about it, you know?”

“You’re right,” I admitted with a nod. “That’s precisely why I asked you to come with me. I trust you, Sudo-kun, you won’t talk to anyone about this negotiation, will you?”

Though I never said it outright, the message was clear, this was to be kept strictly confidential.

Sudo-kun looked momentarily puzzled, but as he reached up toward the elevator’s up call button, he gave me a firm nod.

“W-Well… if you’re asking me to keep it quiet, then I won’t tell anyone.”

“Thank you. Oh, going down is fine.”

Before his slowly extended arm could press the button, I reached out and pressed the down button myself.

“I’ll take the stairs. Anyway, thanks again for helping me out on such short notice today. Good night.”

With those words of gratitude, I turned on my heel and headed toward the emergency exit door.

“Suzune!”

His voice called out to stop me.

“…What is it?”

“I—I, um…”

Had he not thought of what to say, or simply couldn't find the words to say it?

I tilted my head slightly at his restless manner as he choked on his words.

“If you have something to say, go ahead. Did you dislike the way I handled things?”

“No, that’s not it. That’s not what I meant…” he said, struggling. “I… I might not be able to take Ayanokoji’s place, but still…”

Ayanokoji-kun. Hearing that name made me open my eyes wide in surprise.

“I’m not as strong, or as smart as that guy… but even so, I’ll always be by your side, Suzune. So, whenever you’re in trouble, rely on me, like you did today.”

With eyes brimming with resolve, Sudo-kun looked straight at me and said those words.

“You caused quite a bit of trouble for the class back in our first year. So for the coming year, I expect you to pull your weight until the very end.”

“Ugh…”

At my blunt and unforgiving response, Sudo-kun let out a strained smile, maybe even broke into a cold sweat.

“The elevator’s here. Give my regards to Onodera-san,” I said.

“Ah— yeah. Well… see you tomorrow,” he replied awkwardly.

“Mm. See you tomorrow.”

I watched as Sudo-kun stepped into the elevator, then turned away and headed toward the emergency staircase.

“Thank you, Sudo-kun. You saying that made me very happy.”

I couldn't bring myself to say those words out loud. Not just yet. Because, I couldn't ignore the warmth swelling in my chest.

I have people standing by me. Classmates I can rely on.

Even if Ayanokoji-kun is gone, I can’t afford to dwell in despair forever.

I must find a way, no matter what, to live up to the people who continue to support me.

Chapter 4: Pursuit of knowledge

❖

The morning after the exam announcement dawned quietly.

This day marked the beginning of the one-week period that would either serve as the exam itself or time to prepare for it.

But for me, I didn't need to do anything special. I would simply wake up, head to school, attend my classes diligently, spend my after-school time as I wished, and get ready for the next day.

As for my classmates, I'd given them a single instruction. Beyond that, they were free to do as they pleased.

Stick to their usual routine if they wished. Study extra if they felt like it. It was entirely up to their own initiative.

It was still quite early to be heading out, but unless I had something else to take care of, I wanted to keep up this habit of arriving ahead of time.

Turning off the TV, and putting on my shoes, I swiftly stepped out into the hallway.

As the elevator arrived and doors slid open, I was met with the sight of five girls and one boy already inside. Mornings before school were often packed, so seeing a full elevator was nothing out of the ordinary.

Technically, there was still room, I *could* have squeezed in but...

The three girls: Shinohara, Matsushita, and Inogashira stared at me with a cold and distant gaze as they stood inside the elevator.

Well, there was no point in forcing myself into that cramped space. Better to let it go and catch the next one.

I could have taken the stairs, but I decided to wait for the next elevator.

When it arrived, once again, three girls were already inside. But this time, there was enough space.

Yet... my feet felt oddly heavy. Just for a moment, I hesitated. Should I get in? Or Should I wait?

But, leaving now would be even more awkward. It was obvious there was space.

I took a step forward and decided to enter the elevator.

Turning around to face the doors, I waited silently as the elevator descended, and soon we reached the first floor.

Since I had been the last to enter, I was the first to step out. After walking a few steps into the lobby, I stopped, and just then, the two girls behind me passed swiftly by my side.

“.....Good morning.”

A soft voice reached me from behind, carefully gentle so as not to startle me. It was Hiyori, the girl who had been in the elevator with me.

Since I transferred to Class C, I’d caught glimpses of her a few times, and even crossed paths on occasion. But we hadn't quite had a proper conversation yet.

“Morning.” I replied.

“Have you been well?”

“Same as always.”

That was it. A short exchange.

For some reason, I couldn’t seem to keep the conversation going, and it left me oddly unsettled.

Had it been the library, I would’ve started by apologizing for the class transfer, then slowly let the conversation drift toward books. That’s how I’d imagined it would go.

But maybe I hadn't expected to meet her somewhere like this.

—No, that's just a convenient excuse.

In a space this small, a moment like this, with just the two of us, was always possible. Inevitable, even.

It could've happened yesterday. Or the day before. I should've been prepared for it.

And yet, I can't find the words.

This has never happened to me before.

Though an odd sensation lingered between us, we began walking side by side, sharing the path to school in quiet company.

It was a short walk, just a few minutes at most, but I figured that if we kept walking, a conversation would eventually find its way between us. That, at least, was what I hoped for.

But, as is often the case, things rarely go according to plan at moments like these.

Just as we stepped outside, timing our departure in hopes of breaking the silence with a word or two, we noticed a trio standing a short distance from the dorm, their eyes fixed on the lobby—Hashimoto, Morishita, and Shiraishi.

Judging by their presence, it was clear their business had something to do with me.

Hashimoto stepped forward, acting as their representative.

"Yo, morning. And you too, Shiina, good morning," he greeted us with his usual laid-back ease.

"Wanted to run over a few class-related issues before we got to school," Hashimoto added.

Normally, I wouldn't mind a sudden visit from a Class C student. But right now? The timing couldn't have been worse.

Perhaps sensing that, or simply wanting to distance herself quickly, Hiyori offered light greetings to the three and quietly excused herself, making her way down the path to school alone.

“Whoops, did I interrupt something? My bad.”

Though he put on an apologetic front, it was clear that his words were carefully chosen, a calculated move to drive away an outsider who wasn’t one of our classmates.

“It's fine.”

If I really want to have a proper conversation with Hiyori, I know I could always meet her in the library like I had originally planned. That had always been an option, one I’d known about for a long time. Still, I’d kept putting it off. But after today, I couldn’t keep avoiding it. It was time to face it and clear the air.

“You really don’t know when to stop, do you, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka? Going after even Hiyori Shiina now?”

“How’d you even reach that conclusion?”

“So you say, but who knows what’s really going on?”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with getting close to a few cute girls, is it? And I must say, choosing Shiina-san? That’s some excellent taste. Really, you have a wonderful sense for beauty.”

I glanced over at Shiraishi and noticed a gleam in her eyes as she watched Hiyori’s retreating figure. The conversation I’d had the other day with Shimazaki and Yoshida briefly resurfaced in my mind.

Anyway, there was no point dragging out this pointless chatter, so I nudged Hashimoto to cut to the chase.

“I wanted to confirm the strategy you sent over yesterday regarding the special exam,” Hashimoto said.

“I was curious about that too,” Shiraishi added with a gentle smile. “Since Hashimoto-kun seemed to be waiting for Ayanokoji-kun, I thought I’d join in.”

“And Morishita as well?” Hashimoto raised an eyebrow. “It’s rare for you to be interested.”

“I’m just your friendly neighborhood spectator.”

Declared the nosy neighbor flatly.

> **Translator’s Note:** Morishita uses the term **野次馬** (*yajiuma*) to refer to herself. Historically, this word described rowdy spectators at kabuki theaters who would heckle or shout during performances. In modern usage, it refers to nosy bystanders—people who gather around when drama unfolds.
> We opted for a playful twist on "nosy bystander" with "friendly neighborhood spectator", to evoke the image of a modern day gossip-loving neighborhood ‘aunty’ who’s always in for some tea.
> Later, when Ayanokoji calls her *yajiuma* again in his monologue, we adapted it as "nosy neighbor" to keep the repetition of *yajiuma* while also maintaining the light, playful rapport from the original.

“You posted those instructions for the special exam in the group chat last night, right?” Hashimoto continued, a hint of admiration in his tone. “Seeing that, I felt like you were finally stepping up into your role as the class leader. Honestly, I was kind of moved.”

The message had outlined a critical insight: the school likely intended to evaluate student behavior as part of the test. It emphasized that not only weekday conduct but also weekend actions would be under scrutiny. Students unsure of their behavior were advised to stay within the dorms.

These were the kinds of subtle but significant points I had shared.

“With you in charge, I feel like the class will run more smoothly than we could’ve imagined. Things got complicated in different ways under Sakayanagi’s leadership, y’know. Don’t you think so too, Shiraishi?”

Hashimoto turned towards her, fishing for agreement, but the response he got wasn’t quite what he’d expected.

“Actually, I still hold our former leader, Sakayanagi-san, in high regard. It's true that she often acted on her own judgement, but even so, for two years she maintained the position of Class A without ever letting it fall.”

If an anomaly like me hadn't shown up, she'd have likely maintained that control for all three years, leading them to securely graduate from Class A.

“I agree with that take.” Morishita added, “Though it seems Hashimoto Masayoshi, despite having been at her side, is oddly negative about her.”

“What’s with that look...? I’m just sayin’, it’s precisely because I was her close aide that I had to put up with so much trouble. And in the end, it was her own reckless behavior that dropped us to Class C.”

Hashimoto spoke as though he bore absolutely no fault in the matter himself.

“Oh? I don't really think so. Shall I specifically explain the reasons why?” Morishita replied cooly.

“.....Nah, I'll pass. Just listening to your nonsense is tiring enough.”

“A wise decision—*Betrayer Hashimoto THE Masayoshi.*”

“What’s even that ‘THE’ supposed to mean!?”

Hashimoto, baffled by the bizarre nickname, shot back with the timing of a seasoned comedian.

> **Translator’s Note: 突っ込み** is a term from Japanese comedy, especially manzai, where there's a straight man (*tsukkomi*) and a funny man (*boke*). The *tsukkomi* reacts to the *boke’s* absurdity with a sharp or exaggerated correction/retort.

“Oh my, what’s this about being a betrayer?”

“Don’t mind it at all. That’s just Morishita’s usual nonsense. Anyway, let’s get back to the topic.”

Just as Hashimoto tried to steer the conversation back to the exam, two figures emerged from the lobby right on cue: Kondo and Komiya from Ryuen's class, striding toward us and closing the gap. Their pace was deliberate, almost as if they had timed their entrance.

"Well, if it isn't the new class leader and his lackeys," Kondo said with a smirk. "Scheming somethin' shady this early in the morning?"

He let his eyes sweep over each of us, then began to circle our group like a predator sizing up its prey.

"It's been a while, Kondo. Seems like you've been keeping your distance from our class lately," said Hashimoto.

"Things are different now," he replied flatly. "We're B Class, you're C Class. We only bother keeping an eye on the ones above us."

He made it sound like we weren't worth the trouble, but the fact that he was standing here at all told a different story. More than anything, beneath his casual tone, there was the faintest thread of tension in his voice, one he couldn't quite conceal.

"Then you could've just ignored us today too, you know?" Hashimoto shot back.

Kondo smirked. "I figured you might get lonely if I didn't mess with you a little,".

Just like the other day when Ryuen barged into our classroom, the usually noisy Morishita had gone completely silent, like a borrowed cat. Now she stood there staring at the trees with an innocent look on her face, as if none of this had anything to do with her.

"Besides, if you're having an interesting conversation, I thought I'd stick around and listen."

"Too bad for you," Hashimoto said flatly. "I was just mourning the start of yet another boring day."

It was almost certain that Ryuen had given instructions to Kondo and the others to figure out the rules of the exam. Maybe they were hoping to squeeze out even the smallest hint. Or perhaps, just like us, he'd already zeroed in on a theory and sent Kondo and the others as quiet enforcers.

In any case, they stuck to us like glue, till the end. Without saying a word or acting suspiciously, they simply radiated an oppressive, silent pressure until we reached the classroom and finally parted ways.

Part 1

When the final bell rang, before I could even take a step, Hashimoto closed the distance and spoke up.

“Your schedule’s free today, right? Let’s pick up where we left off this morning.”

“Sorry,” Morishita’s voice floated from the seat behind me before I could answer, “I’ve got plans, so I’ll have to decline. Try not to cry about it.”

“I wasn’t talking to you…” Hashimoto sighed. “Ayanokoji. I meant Ayanokoji.”

I had expected this would happen ever since our conversation was interrupted this morning, but at this rate, the opportunity to head to the library would slip further away.

Should I turn him down for now and prioritize meeting Hiyori?

No... we've already entered the exam period.

Then, for the sake of healthy class operations, visiting the library, a purely personal matter, would have to wait.

Besides, there was still a chance I could see her once this talk was over.

“Shall we change locations?”

“Probably for the best. You look like you’ve got a troublesome lingering spirit hanging over your shoulder, Ayanokoji”

With Hashimoto urging me to get up, I followed him out into the hallway.

Shiraishi, who'd been with us in the morning, was now deep in conversation with Nakajima from the girls' side. She seemed to notice us, but without a word, the two of them walked out of the classroom together.

"The cafe at Keyaki Mall work for you?" Hashimoto asked.

I had no reason to refuse, so I gave him a casual nod.

"You're treating, right, Hashimoto Masayoshi?"

"If you're insisting, I guess I could... Wait— why are you coming along?"

"Since you called me a lingering spirit, I thought I should follow through on the word to haunt you with ethical spiritual principles. For the honor of lingering spirits, y'know."

Whether spiritual beings actually needed to uphold principles or have their honor protected was debatable. More likely, she just didn't like the idea of me and Hashimoto talking alone.

"Jeez. You really plan on keeping me under constant surveillance?"

"For the sake of healthy class operations, it's a road we can't avoid," Morishita replied without missing a beat. "But don't worry, I won't demand anything expensive. I'm a woman who's gentle on wallets."

> **Translator's Note:** Both Morishita and Ayanokoji use the phrase "healthy class operations" (**健全なクラス運営**), but Ayanokoji says **健全な**, while Morishita says **健全なる**. Morishita's is slightly more formal and old-fashioned, giving her words a more elevated or serious tone. Implying Ayanokoji said it more reluctantly.

"I'm not treatin' you."

"Oh? You'll treat Ayanokoji Kiyotaka but not me? Is that... hah... gender discrimination... " I couldn't tell if she was truly stunned or just putting on an act, but her eyes widened theatrically as she muttered,

“Guess I’ll just post about it online and rally my comrades for a coordinated attack,” she added, already pulling out her phone and tapping away.

“Argh, seriously, whenever you show up, the conversation never moves forward.”

“If you want to move the conversation forward, why not generously cover the ‘tea-beating fee’ instead of being stingy? It’ll help things go smoothly, just a small price to pay.”

> **Translator’s Note:** Here, しばく (Kansai slang for "beat up") twists it into "beat the tea into submission," sarcastically framing payment as a fee to violently enforce harmony, a bribe. Furthermore, the use of the slang might mean that Morishita is from the Kansai region.

“Fine, damn it. I’ll treat you. Just, when we’re having a serious discussion, be quiet. I mean it.”

As if those words were the deciding factor, Morishita gave the faintest nod and promptly shut her mouth. Then pressing her left thumb and forefinger together she made a tiny sliding motion across the air in front of her lips, from right to left.

Did that mean she was zipping her mouth shut...?

We started walking again, and after confirming that she had actually gone quiet, Hashimoto began to speak, looking at me.

“Yesterday, I spent the whole day checking out the other classes.”

“Found anything?”

“Unfortunately, there wasn't much of a harvest to speak of. In a special exam without any rule explanations, it’s no wonder no one can make any move right away. All three classes were quiet. Or rather, I should say they were no different than usual.”

This clearly wasn’t his main point, he skimmed through the report and kept going.

"The instructions you gave us last night, or rather, your idea... Did you tell Ichinose too?"

"Of course. As allies, we need to share information."

"...I see. Well, for now, it actually works in our favor if Class D climbs up the ranks. If we take first and Ichinose takes second, that'd be the perfect outcome."

He probably wasn't completely free of dissatisfaction, but it seemed this was just a precautionary check to be sure.

"If this test turns out exactly the way you predicted, Ryuen's class is practically guaranteed to lose again. And if Horikita's class is even one step late to notice the rule, they won't be able to recover. Even if there's some surprise exam waiting after this, we won't lose an academic contest. I'd say we've already got this one in the bag."

"It's when you let your guard down that you get blindsided. And Horikita's not stupid, she realized yesterday that our 'lifestyle behavior' might be under observation."

When I said that with certainty, Hashimoto stopped mid-step, glancing back at me.

"...Huh? That so?"

Judging from my tone that I wasn't bluffing, he started walking again.

"What makes you so sure she's caught on?"

"Because uniting a class... is never that simple."

I didn't need to say much. Hashimoto picked up on it right away and let out a brief whistle.

"You either got a top notch scout, or a spy hidden somewhere, either way, you're pretty good at extracting the information."

Normally, the ever-curious Hashimoto would've pressed for more, including whether I was already using Yamamura, but this time he held back. Something in his instincts told him that prodding carelessly now, and souring my opinion of him, wouldn't do him any favors.

Part 2

The three of us made our way towards the cafe in Keyaki Mall.

At the entrance, a girl spotted us and gave a small wave. Hashimoto and I exchanged a glance before heading her way.

“I thought I might join you as well,” said Shiraishi, the very same who had left the classroom earlier with Nakajima.

“Where’s Nakajima?” I asked.

“We were just chatting for a bit, but then went our separate ways. You knew I was with Nakajima-san, that's impressive.”

“Of course. Watching Shiraishi Asuka from afar is Ayanokoji Kiyotaka’s specialty, practically licking her with his eyes. Right?”

Saying that, Morishita patted my shoulder and shot me a triumphant thumbs-up.

“Could you not make me sound like a pervert?” I muttered.

“What, afraid of being disliked? Even though everyone in your old class already hates you?”

“Hey now, just because it’s true doesn’t mean you should say it out loud. Besides, we're here for him now. And honestly as a man… well, I can understand wanting to look at Shiraishi.”

Hashimoto patted my other shoulder and offered his own thumbs-up.

“This is who Ayanokoji Kiyotaka is, but please try not to hate him.”

No matter how you looked at it, Morishita was orchestrating this whole thing to make me look bad. And even if I said I was simply in the habit of keeping tabs on the class as a whole, it would only sound like a flimsy excuse.

“Oh my, I’m actually delighted. Being watched by someone I’m interested in, it’s an honor,” Shiraishi said with a small smile.

“Seriously? Well, good for you, Ayanokoji. Sounds like you’ve got a shot,” Hashimoto chimed in. It probably wasn’t the first time he’d heard her give a comeback like that; knowing it was half a joke, he played along easily.

I, on the other hand, didn’t know how to answer either way, so I just let it slide.

“You understand, right? Morishita.”

“I'll be a good girl during the discussion, rest assured. Just make sure you treat me, okay?”

With our party now grown from three to four, we each placed our orders and settled into an open seat, our usual spot.

Strange as it is, people are creatures of habits.

They gravitate toward places they’ve already experienced and feel comfortable in. Choosing spots that match subtle conditions: the angle of the light, the view from the table, the space between seats.

It’s not just about physical comfort, memory plays its part as well.

Pleasant times spent with certain companions, fun conversations, moments when a good idea came to mind. Those positive traces draw you back, associations which cannot be ignored.

On the other hand, bitter memories push you away from a seat just as surely.

A rational tendency of the human mind, one I suspect Hashimoto and Morishita have experienced as well.

Even with Shiraishi joining us, the mood didn’t shift, neither better nor worse. She had a way of blending seamlessly into the space, as if she’d always been there.

"Seriously? Making me buy a drink and a *crazy pricey* at that? You know I'm low on funds and still went for the kill."

> **Translator's Note:** Kansai slang used here but for Hashimoto. That might mean Hashimoto is also from the Kansai region or maybe the Author (or the editor?) is.

In exchange for her promise to stay quiet, Hashimoto had treated Morishita to a brand-new strawberry frappé, packed so full you could spot at least five whole berries just at a glance.

Most drinks here went for around 500 private points, maybe even 800 on the higher end. This one came in at 1,300 points.

"My mother always taught me to be bold when someone's treating. I was merely following her teaching," Morishita replied. Probably a lie, but she delivered it with perfect composure.

"Honestly, though... I just wanted a regular cafe latte," she added, then jabbed her straw into the frappé with all the enthusiasm of someone poking a dead fish.

"Then you should've just ordered a latte..."

While quietly watching their exchange from the sidelines, I took the first sip of my coffee, and exhaled. The warmth slid down my throat, a small preparation for the conversation with Hashimoto that was soon to follow.

"Alright, from here on, it's a serious discussion."

Immediately after, Morishita made a zipping motion across her mouth, clearly indicating that she'd stay silent.

"You seem fired up," I began quietly once all eyes were on me, "but honestly, I'm not planning to focus on winning or losing this exam."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hashimoto asked with suspicion.

Like almost every student, he was dead set on winning *every* exam this year. Hearing that I didn't care about the outcome was bound to raise eyebrows.

"It's just like the last special exam; the change in class points was minimal and had little overall impact. This time, the reward is only about half of what it was then."

"Sure, maybe it won't hurt much even if we slip up here," he said, "but still, what do you mean, not concerned about winning or losing?"

To greedily aim for even one rank higher, that seemed to be his mindset. Hashimoto didn't bother hiding his dissatisfaction when I challenged that line of thinking. However, I have no intention of taking a strict stance on this exam.

"To be precise, rather than not being concerned with winning or losing, it might be closer to say that there's no reason to be concerned."

The phrasing must have clicked with Shiraishi. She smiled faintly and nodded.

"I think I understand. You believe the information you passed to us is as close to the truth as it gets, don't you?"

The exact nature of this exam was still hidden. Every third-year would have to spend the week juggling possible scenarios in their head. If it turned out to be something like a written test, where results are tied directly to ability, then, like Hashimoto, you'd naturally aim to win and do what you could to raise your chances. Even burying yourself in study for a week could push you closer to victory.

But the scenario I considered most likely was *lifestyle behavior*.

"You can avoid the obvious negatives," I explained, "but there's no way to earn extra points. All we can do is wait for the other classes to slip. That's why there's no point in getting worked up."

“So you don't think it'll be a competition of academics or athletics? But in that case, wouldn't it have been better to let them know about it from the start? Plenty of people are still stressin’ out, trying to prep for anything, y’know.”

“If they’re willing to put in the effort, let them. With the rules still unclear, they probably won’t zero in on a single target or push things too far.”

Hashimoto's expression remained somewhat stiff, as if some part of him was still unconvinced. Morishita remained silent, so I thought the topic of this exam was coming to a close, but to my surprise, Shiraishi leaned in.

“May I ask a few questions? Ayanokoji-kun, you've judged that the exam is based on our daily lifestyle behaviour, but what do you think the probability of that is?”

“Over ninety percent,” I said without hesitation. “At least, that’s my assessment.”

“...That’s ridiculously high,” Hashimoto muttered, half in disbelief, half in amusement. “In that case, maybe I should buy in too. If you’re right, my trust in you’s only going up.”

“How did you exactly arrive at that number? We can’t even say for certain if this week is a preparation period or part of the test itself, that’s why everyone’s imagining possibilities from every angle. You seem to have based your conclusion on Mashima-sensei’s comment about ‘manner befitting a student’ but that alone feels like weak evidence.”

She wanted the reasoning that turned scraps of information into a claim of over ninety percent.

“If it were only that one statement,” I said, “it wouldn’t have even reached fifty.”

Hashimoto turned his head toward the others. “But was there anything else he said that stood out? Did we miss something?”

He scanned back through yesterday's conversation with Mashima-sensei, waiting for Shiraishi and Morishita to confirm.

"I can't think of any,"

As Shiraishi denied it, Morishita also nodded her head vertically while keeping her mouth shut.

"That's because no other hints have surfaced, at least not from Class C," I replied.

"What do you mean?" Hashimoto asked.

"What some students focused on in this exam was the phrase from Mashima-sensei, 'manner befitting a student'."

"Yeah, that caught my attention too." Hashimoto admitted, "But you can't be sure if it's related to the exam or not, right?"

"If something's ambiguous, you test it. What I focused on was one step beyond that: whether the phrase itself was significant. And if it was, the next step was to see if that remark was shared across all classes. If the school had instructed every teacher to deliver it word-for-word, then I could be certain the phrase itself had meaning."

"So you mean... what the teachers of the other three classes said?" Shiraishi ventured.

"That's right. I don't have information on Sakagami-sensei, but Hoshinomiya-sensei apparently said, 'You all will be fine as you usually are.' And Chabashira-sensei said, 'Show me that you're no longer the same as when you first entered this school.'"

Add Mashima-sensei's comment to those, and the outline of the rules at play in this exam starts to come into view. Even the three standing before me should be able to see it now.

"On its own, one statement wouldn't have been enough to narrow things down," Shiraishi said, "but once you add in the other classes' information, it's like the noise just falls away."

“Yeah… no kidding,” Hashimoto agreed. “At this point I can’t think of any rule it could be besides lifestyle behaviour.”

He exhaled, the wry smile on his lips doing little to hide his genuine admiration.

Horikita's class, which lost all its class points due to poor daily lifestyle behaviour upon enrollment.

Ichinose's class, which received some negative assessment but steadily produced results.

And Sakayanagi's class, which was more stable than any other class.

It can be interpreted as advice from the teachers that corresponds to their respective results.

“By the way,” I added, “how I got intel from those two classes… that’s a trade secret.”

Hashimoto and Morishita probably figured out that Hoshinomiya-sensei's statement had come through Ichinose. But with Shiraishi here, and the Horikita-class intel mixed in, I kept the source to myself.

The alliance could be revealed when the time was right.

“Lifestyle behaviour is something to be mindful of on a daily basis and can't sway the outcome. That's why you don't intend to be concerned with it this time. Yeah… now it all fits together.”

“I'm glad you seem to understand.” I said. “But more than this exam, what I want you three to keep your eyes on… is the next special exam.”

“The next? Are you saying there's a high probability that the next special exam will be a big battle?”

“Yeah. Considering the previous one and this one, it wouldn't be strange if it carried real risks.”

“You mean… the kind where someone might actually get expelled?”

“I can't say for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised if it ends up being part of the rules. The odds aren’t exactly low.”

“Well, it's not like it's always going to be no-risk, but aren't exams with that much risk rarer?”

Hashimoto threw out the question, wondering if it was something to be that cautious about.

“No, you can’t say that for sure,” Morishita finally spoke, breaking the silence she’d kept until now. “Compared to the other years, the third-years’ expulsion risk has clearly been higher. Just look at the seniors over the past two years.”

From her tone, she clearly understood the cases of Horikita Manabu’s generation, and Nagumo Miyabi’s as well.

“Come to think of it,” Hashimoto said, “by the start of the second semester last year, there’d already been a bunch of expulsions, right?”

“Yes. Around fifteen,” Morishita replied, “Nagumo Miyabi did whatever he pleased back then. Even if that was an extreme case, there’s no way everyone will make it through this year unharmed.”

“Getting expelled at this difficult time would be no laughing matter, but man, you remember that well.”

“This much is common knowledge, *c-o-m-m-o-n knowledge*.”

Hashimoto has a sharp eye for gathering information on students in his own year, but he doesn’t seem all that interested in keeping tabs on those from other grades.

“Wait a sec, weren’t you supposed to be just listening quietly? What happened to keeping your mouth zipped?”

“Eh? When did I say such a thing? What time, what minute, what second, and on what rotation of the earth?”

“Huh? What the hell kind of nonsense is that? How many Earth rotations… what?”

“Oh, dear. Do the youth living in modern times not even know the statements made by the great figures of the past?”

I liked to think I had a decent grasp of historical figures and their famous sayings, but this one was drawing a blank.

The Earth takes about twenty-four hours to complete a single rotation, or rather, we call it twenty-four based on that rotation period. By that logic, with the planet being around 4.5 billion years old, if you multiply by 365 days per year, account for leap years, and keep crunching the numbers—

…No. That’s a completely pointless calculation.

“If you really can’t let it go, I’ll give you your drink back,” she said.

“Give it back…? It’s empty!”

While she’d been silent, she’d been steadily sipping away at that strawberry frappé the whole time.

Did she really chug the whole thing just so she could jump back to talk?

Part 3

After that, I spent some time drawing out information about Class C from Hashimoto and Shiraishi.

These were things you couldn't find in OAA stats or written test results like who got along with whom, and who couldn't stand each other.

Hashimoto had a solid grasp on the class dynamics, but as expected, there are many things that only a girl can see about other girls, and I was able to hear a few tidbits that made me nod in agreement.

About an hour had passed since we started chatting at the cafe, and it was gradually getting crowded as evening approached.

Just as I was starting to consider wrapping things up—

"Ugh... Ayanokoji again...!"

Two figures approached the table next to ours, turning towards me with clear disappointment. Ike and Hondo— the same pair I'd bumped into in the cafeteria yesterday.

"Guess we're fated to meet," I said.

When I gave that reply, they narrowed their eyes with displeasure.

"What do you mean, 'fated to meet'? Don't act all buddy-buddy with us, you traitor."

Disgust oozed from his expression. I thought they might move to another table right away like they did yesterday, but with the cafe this crowded, they dropped into the chairs next to us as if they had no other choice.

Watching the Class A duo, Hashimoto decided to play it casual.

“C’mon, even if our classes are different, we're still students living in the same school. Let's try to get along better, yeah? Or are you gonna complain every time we see each other?”

“It’s not like that... But it still pisses me off, you know.” Ike muttered.

They didn’t seem to vent at Hashimoto, so Ike and Hondo leaned towards me instead, fixing me with another glare.

“Why do you need to be so angry? Ayanokoji didn't transfer from C to A. If he just changed classes, it doesn't affect the class points. It's not like your wallets are hurting. Above all, you guys are the almighty Class A, right?”

Hashimoto chose his words carefully, trying to flatter them just enough to shave down their pointless irritation.

“Yeah, we’re Class A,” Ike shot back, “but Ayanokoji was hiding how smart he was. That’s like betraying us from day one. Then he transfers and suddenly pulls a perfect score? I’ve never seen a bigger middle finger than that.”

I did produce proper results in the latter half of my time in Horikita's class, but for Ike and the others, that probably just gave them one more reason to dislike me.

“And besides—”

Ike broke off, turning away from Hashimoto to level his gaze squarely at me.

“I’ve been hearing all sorts of nasty rumors,” Ike said, his voice tight. “About how you set things up from the start so Sakura and Maezono would get expelled. Don’t tell me… Haruki was one of your victims too?”

Someone who had been especially close to Ike and Sudo, a former old friend, suddenly came up in the conversation.

"Haruki? Who's that?" Hashimoto tilted his head slightly with a blank expression, clearly not recognizing the name.

"Yamauchi Haruki!" Ike shouted, slamming his palms on the table as he shot to his feet. The cups rattled violently, though, thankfully, none fell over. Up to this point, he'd managed to voice his grievances without losing control, but this had struck an unexpected nerve.

"Yamauchi… oh, yeah. Now that you mention it, there was a guy like that. My bad, I'd completely forgotten since he was from another class. But I remember now. That was Sakayanagi's doing, wasn't it? Ayanokoji had nothing to do with it. You can't just pin every little thing on him."

Hashimoto offered a quick, genuine apology for forgetting, then hurried to smooth things over before Ike's temper flared further.

"I'm not letting someone like you get me expelled, no matter what!" Ike shouted, his words sharp and unwavering.

"Calm down, Ike," Hashimoto said, raising a hand. "There's no need to raise some huge, pointless flag like that. Trading insults here won't do anyone any good."

But Ike's heated attitude showed no signs of cooling, and for once, Hashimoto looked genuinely flustered. He probably couldn't care less about Ike's personal feelings, but this noisy scene was doing the class no favors.

Horikita had likely explained one of the possible rules for this exam to him, but I couldn't tell if he'd truly understood. If he was faking this outburst to sabotage Class C, that was one thing, maybe even clever in its own way. But it also raised his own risk of losing, a poor tactic. And if he kept shouting like this, it was only a matter of time before someone took notice and slapped us with a penalty.

"Okay… maybe I went a little overboard," Ike admitted grudgingly. "But Class A has every right to complain like this. So tell me, how much did they pay you to sell out your class?"

The sting of the last special exam's loss still lingered, frustration simmering just under the surface. This wasn't something that could be brushed aside with the easygoing deflections Hashimoto favored.

If nothing else, letting him vent, and taking the full brunt of his anger might be the only way to keep things from boiling over.

"Who knows? Could be 20 million, or could be 30. Unfortunately, I have no intention of telling you the exact amount here." I said.

What mattered was to keep my response cold and detached. That way, Ike and his friend could pour all their resentment onto me without hesitation. And once they carried it back to their class, it would give them a common enemy to unite against.

Even if the school was watching through cameras or planted observers, I wanted it to look like Class A was the aggressor, while Class C was trying to keep things civil.

Whether the school actually monitored that closely was unknown. But even if this exam had nothing to do with our daily behaviour, it was still vital to act with the discipline expected of a student. That, however slightly, influenced our monthly class points.

The teachers' words, sent to each class, would serve as a good chance to reinforce to students the importance of sticking to the fundamentals.

"Don't come crawling back later, begging to rejoin our class," Ike spat, tossing one last insult before he and Hondo leaned back and returned to their seats.

They'd only just sat down over there, and I wasn't about to ruin what little cafe time they had left by dragging it out.

"Shall we head back?" I asked the three, lifting my nearly empty cup as I rose.

"Yeah. We've said what we needed to," Hashimoto replied, following my lead with Morishita and Shiraishi falling in step behind him.

As we stepped outside the cafe, Hashimoto cast a glance over his shoulder toward Ike and the others.

"That whole rant was just Ike spinning his wheels. The way he blames every little thing on you… yeah, their class atmosphere's still heavy. They need to switch gears, fast."

"That may be true logically, but I think it's better to give them a little leeway. If I were in Class A right now, I doubt I'd be calm either."

"Maybe so," Hashimoto conceded, "but still— you didn't take any compensation. Shouldn't you have denied it? Otherwise, they'll just spread whatever garbage they want."

"It's fine," I said flatly. "The rumor's already out there. Even if it sounds a little more believable now, it won't change anything."

"So you really don't care what people think of you, huh? Still, connecting it all the way to Yamauchi… that's a stretch if you ask me." Hashimoto muttered.

While he looked exasperated, Morishita shot me a narrow, suspicious glance.

"You never know. You can't be sure what this man, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, is doing behind the scenes. It's quite possible he had a hand in it, by some chance." she said.

"Nah, that's pushing it," Hashimoto replied, waving a hand. "But if by some chance it were true, then that'd just make him one hell of a reassuring ally. The stronger the ally, the better."

No matter how things turned out, Hashimoto was determined to take it positively.

“If you overestimate someone too much, the disappointment later will just hit as much harder,” I warned.

“I'll overestimate you as much as I want.” Hashimoto said without hesitation.

I wanted to hedge my bets, just in case, but it seemed he wasn’t going to let me.

Part 4

By the time we stepped out of Keyaki Mall, the clock had slipped past five. The sky was still a rich blue, but it wouldn't be long before the sunset began peeking over the horizon.

"Sorry," I said, "but I'm going to take a little detour before heading back."

"A detour? Where to? I was thinking we'd go back together." Hashimoto frowned,

Apparently, he'd assumed we'd return to the dorms together.

"The school," I replied. "I'm dropping by the library."

"Ah, Shiina, huh? Now that I think about it, I guess we did interrupt you two talking this morning." Hashimoto put on a suitably sheepish expression.

Since they'd prioritized their own business earlier, he couldn't complain after that.

"In that case, I'll see you off gracefully today," he said. "Come on, Morishita, Shiraishi, let's head back."

"No thank you. Why do I have to walk home hand-in-hand with Hashimoto Masayoshi?"

"I never said anything about holding hands! How'd you even make that leap?"

"I won't walk home with you even if we're not holding hands. I'm going to wander around Keyaki Mall and then go home. Bye then."

With a graceful turn, Morishita spun on her heel and disappeared back into Keyaki Mall.

"It seems Hashimoto-kun is disliked by Morishita-san more than expected, "

“Fine with me if she hates me. I don't really mind being disliked by her. Well then, Shiraishi, shall we—”

“I'll also be taking a little detour on my way home. Let's walk home together some other time, okay, Hashimoto-kun?”

“Damn… really? That’s a shame.”

When Morishita rejected him, Hashimoto didn’t seem to care much, but being turned down by Shiraishi as well was a surprise. He slumped his shoulders, looking a little disappointed, and headed home alone.

“Would you mind if I walk with you for a while?” Shiraishi asked.

“Do you have some business at school?”

“No. I just thought I'd like to chat with Ayanokoji-kun a little more.”

“With me? Compared to Hashimoto, I’m not sure I can have interesting conversations, is that okay?”

“That's just very modest of you. You're a very interesting person, Ayanokoji-kun.”

Though it was hard to feel truly praised, even if it was just flattery, it didn’t feel bad to hear it.

Walking alongside Shiraishi, we strolled slowly towards the school. At this pace, it would only take a few minutes to reach the entrance.

“Come to think of it, this is only the second time we've been alone like this.”

The first time was the day after I transferred to Class C, that morning when I arrived early to observe my new classmates.

“Fufu, that’s true. Not many days have passed since then,” she said softly.

"...That's true too."

Since that day, I had tried to make a habit of arriving at school early, but Shiraishi no longer appeared first in the classroom. My impression now was that she tended to come in a bit later. She had said, that time was a rare occasion for her to wake up early, so it was probably not her usual habit.

I glanced at her and asked, "Shiraishi, what kind of impression do you have of me?"

"Oh my? That's a pretty straightforward question," she replied.

"Huh?"

"I thought you were a bit more of a stoic type. So I was surprised by such a bold question." she teased lightly.

"No... ah, I see, it could be taken that way. My bad."

It might have sounded like I was asking about romance, like whether she liked or not.

"What I wanted to ask was about my transfer to the class. I felt you welcomed me from an early stage, but wouldn't one normally be more suspicious?"

She smiled and asked back, "Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know.... We had never spoken to each other for two years. I thought that students who watched me from the sidelines would have a rather negative impression."

By safely getting through the first special exam, I had managed to get my classmates to accept me, but Shiraishi seemed to have placed her trust in me even before that.

There was no sign that Hashimoto or Morishita had given her a special explanation early on.

“After Sakayanagi-san left, you were the one who transferred into Class C, weren’t you? Hashimoto-kun was convinced that you would definitely become a major asset. While I'm not surprised that some people still have doubts, I suspect there are actually quite a few, like me, who want to hold onto hope and believe in you straightforwardly.”

Rather than giving up on Class A, they’d put their faith in this last chance and take a gamble.

Saying it aloud is easy, but whether one can truly deceive their own hearts is a different matter altogether.

Thinking about Yoshida and Shimazaki, I want to avoid being alone with Shiraishi as much as possible from now on. But maybe that’s why it’s okay to step a little closer, just this once.

“You might say I'm being self-conscious, but is it possible that you were watching me to some extent even before I transferred classes, Shiraishi?” I asked.

Her gaze back in the karaoke room, how she observed me, had felt a bit too intense towards someone who was practically a stranger. It was different from how she kept her distance from Yoshida and the other boys.

“Aah—”

Her lips parted slightly, releasing a soft sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a word.

Stopping in her tracks, Shiraishi looked directly at me, eyes locking with mine a few steps ahead.

“Ah... this isn’t good.” she said softly.

“Not good? What do you mean?”

She smiled gently and held my gaze without answering.

For a few seconds, silence stretched between us as if time itself had stopped—

“I am Shiraishi Asuka.”

She spoke the words plainly.

We had long since introduced ourselves and even spent time together during lunch breaks and holidays. Yet now, for some reason, she renewed her introduction and extended her hand to me.



“And you— who are you?”

What was the intention behind that statement?

Or was she simply teasing me?

“I'm Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.”

Prepared to be teased, I responded to the question and shook her hand. The touch of her slender fingers was cool, yet undeniably warm beneath the surface.

“Somehow, saying the full name reminds me of Morishita-san.”

“Indeed...”

It wasn’t meant as a tease, but the resemblance to Morishita made Shiraishi laugh quietly.

Compared to Hashimoto, Morishita, Yoshida, and Shimazaki, it was clear just how little I truly understood her. The Shiraishi seen by Yoshida, and the Shiraishi seen by Shimazaki, by weaving their impressions with my own, I had made only the smallest progress.

I had hoped to grasp more of her, but in truth, the mystery only deepened.

Those eyes of hers, mysterious and inscrutable, could not be confined to the simple categories of classmate or neighbor.

Or perhaps, this was simply the essence of the enigmatic personality and atmosphere she carried with her.

“Well then, I'll be heading back now. Please give my regards to Shiina-san.”

Whether it was because there was no reason or because she simply didn’t want to answer, I couldn’t tell.

Either way, she doesn't seem to be harmful for now at least.

From here, I wanted to dig a little deeper and understand what kind of person she truly was.

After that, I made my way through the school and arrived at the library. But sometimes, when timing is off, it's utterly and completely off.

Inside the spacious library, Hiyori was nowhere to be seen. When I asked one of the librarians I often saw around, I was told she had left before 5 o'clock.

It was Friday, the start of the weekend, so it wasn't surprising that Hiyori might have one or two plans of her own.

And thus, day after day, the chance to meet Hiyori kept getting pushed further and further away—

Chapter 5: Yamamura's Courage

❖

It was already Monday, the fourth day since the exam announcement, with the weekend in between, the after-school time had arrived once again.

I had lost count of how many times I had hesitated, yet each day now seemed to pass incredibly quickly.

Outside the window, the sky was still bright, but it wouldn't be long before it bathed in the warm hues of sunset.

Maybe this was what people referred to as sentimental. Not a bad feeling at all.

"Ayanokoji Kiyotaka. Let me have a word with you."

As soon as Mashima-sensei left the classroom, that downer voice flew from the seat behind me, pulling me back to reality. Yes, just like having the hair on the back of my head pulled forcefully.

Tug, tug...

Tug, tug...

Not just like that, I was actually being tugged with quite some strength.

"Can you hear me properly?"

"I can hear you just fine, so stop pulling my hair. Also, your tone leaves much to be desired."

Having no choice, I reluctantly turned around to hear what she had to say.

"Yamamura Miki wants to see you now."

"Yamamura?"

While I was looking outside the window, she had disappeared, without even a sound or a trace. In an instant she must've slipped silently into the hallway.

Apparently, she had left behind a message with Morishita.

“I suppose she could have said it directly, but approaching the current Ayanokoji Kiyotaka face-to-face would make her stand out badly, despite her presence being as thin as shrink wrap. Yes, I admit my magnificent metaphor was a bit of a flop. Is that a problem?”

> **Translator’s Note:** Japanese packaging often uses ultra-thin, clear shrink wrap that fits tightly around items but remains nearly transparent. It is used to tightly seal items without drawing attention to itself.

“I haven't said anything, though…”

She made a joke, retorted to herself, and then quietly got defensive all on her own.

I planned to go to the library today, but I could certainly spare some time to meet with Yamamura.

More importantly, if I miss this chance, there's no telling when she'll call on me next.

“What should I do?”

“You should come with me. I'll guide you. You owe me one for this, you know?”

She quickly stood up and struck a pose with her thumb raised like a helper coming to the rescue.

Honestly, I wouldn’t mind going alone if she just told me the place, but she instead put me in her debt.

...Well, refusing would be a hassle, so I decided to go along with it.

It could be that Morishita wanted to tag along too.

I lightly glanced around the classroom to see who was still left.

Shiraishi and Nishikawa were chatting with a small group of girls, but Hashimoto and Kito had already left.

Part 1

Usually, when I'm planning to meet someone, the location was often somewhere inside Keyaki Mall. Even for someone like Yamamura, who kept her presence as low as possible, this was no exception. But the place she specified was a bit unusual, not a cafe or anything like that.

"Oh? She's not here," Morishita remarked as we arrived at a break area on the second floor lined with vending machines.

Instead of Yamamura, a few first-year students were gathered, chatting on a nearby bench.

No matter how inconspicuous Yamamura was, if she hid right next to the vending machines with a crowd around, she would surely draw unusual attention.

"Seems like she backed out after seeing the group of first-years." Morishita guessed.

"Seems that way. But if she's not here, where could she be? Have you tried calling her?" I asked.

Without answering, Morishita nodded at me to follow her. Crossing her arms, she approached the vending machines and placed her right palm on the floor.

I had no clue what she was doing, so I watched silently.

"Hmm... she must have been sitting here just moments ago. It's still faintly warm," Morishita observed.

"Is that so?"

Even if she'd been sitting on the floor, once she stood up, the warmth should have faded within seconds, or at most, tens of seconds, but...

"If you don't believe me, go ahead and touch it. That way, you'll indirectly feel the warmth of Yamamura Miki's butt."

The way she said it was unpleasant, but curiosity got the better of me, so I touched it with my palm.

Instead of warmth, it felt surprisingly cool.

"Whoa, he actually touched it! What a pervert."

"It was you, who told me to touch it..."

"Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, if someone told you to grope someone, would you just obediently do it?"

"No.. I wouldn't..."

"That's right. You shouldn't be so easily fooled or swayed by others. From now on, you should learn to judge for yourself what's right or wrong, and not get deceived. Got it?"

She just confessed she deceived me.

I wanted to point it out, but what troubled me more was the first-year students nearby who were watching with interest as this small girl scolded me. Probably, they also overheard words like 'butt,' 'warmth,' and 'pervert.'

From start to finish, it was all misunderstandings, but I wasn't about to get a chance to explain myself.

"Anyway, let's move. Yamamura Miki has moved to just outside the south exit."

Morishita said, showing me a message from Yamamura on her phone.

A message had indeed arrived:

Sorry, please allow me to change our meeting place to just outside the south exit. I am truly sorry.

But the timestamp showed it was sent five minutes ago.

“Just to be sure, when did you notice this message?” I asked.

“As soon as it arrived. Why?” she replied casually.

Five minutes ago, that would've been about the time we entered Keyaki Mall.

I had seen her make the motion to take out her phone... so the message had indeed come.

“So that means you knew Yamamura wasn’t here, and that the floor was already cold?”

“Of course I knew all of that,” she answered confidently.

It turned out this whole detour was utterly pointless, no, a completely wasted action.

“Come on, let's hurry to the south exit. If we keep Yamamura Miki waiting for too long, she will disappear from the face of the earth.”

Despite her causing a huge delay herself, she turned back around without a hint of remorse.

Part 2

Just outside the south exit, we simultaneously scanned the area.

“Oh my? She's not here either.”

“Yeah, she’s not.”

It was a place originally far away from the dorms and sparsely populated, so I thought we would find her right away, but we couldn't. I looked towards the roadside trees, but there was still no sign of her.

“What a pain she is. Leading people on a merry chase.”

“You’re one to talk.”

We continued scanning every corner, but found neither her nor any trace she had left behind.

“This is like a live-action version of Where's Wally. What a waste of time.”

> **Translator’s Note:** This refers to a popular visual puzzle book series where you look for a red-and-white-striped character named Waldo/Wally (Known as Wally in Japan, Waldo in the US)

“You're one to ta— ah, never mind.”

No matter how many times I retort, it was probably meaningless by now.

“Even so, I will end up retorting again. That’s the role of the ‘tsukkomi’ in a comedy duo.” She said, giving herself an imaginary reply from my side.

“Don’t just pair us up without asking.”

> **Translator's Note:** "*Tsukkomi*" (突っ込み) is a Japanese term from **manzai** comedy (a traditional style of stand-up comedy involving a duo). It refers to the role of the "**straight man**" who reacts to the silly or absurd remarks of the "*boke*" (**the funny man**) by pointing out their mistakes, making sarcastic comments, or correcting them, often sharply or humorously.

If only we had headed straight for the south exit, we'd been here ten minutes earlier. Maybe Yamamura would have been standing quietly, waiting, though who really knows.

The air was still and quiet when suddenly Morishita's phone vibrated faintly in her hand.

"It's from Yamamura Miki. 'Find me if you can'? How provocative!"

A message like that from Yamamura? I glanced sideways at the phone screen, only to find it was just a notification about the latest economic news.

"Don't sneak a peek at someone else's phone, you rude person," came the sharp rebuke. I realized my impulsive action was indeed a bit rude.

"It can't be helped. Shall I try calling her?" Morishita offered.

"It's not that it can't be helped. Wouldn't it have been better to do so from the start?"

"Radio waves are bad for the brain. I want to avoid using them as much as possible," she explained.

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I felt it was better not to dig deeper.

Just as Morishita put the phone to her ear and started to make a call, I felt a faint breeze from behind.

"Ah, um—"

"Wow, Yamamura Miki just appeared out of nowhere. Don't scare me like that."

“S-sorry.”

Without a sound, Yamamura appeared, lowering her head slightly with a look of apology, likely for the sudden scolding and the changed meeting place.

“I heard from Morishita that you have something to talk to me about, is that true?”

It's a sad state of affairs that I have to be suspicious from that point, but the wonderful relationship of trust I've built up with Morishita so far makes it unavoidable.

“Ye... yes. Since Ayanokoji-kun transferred classes, we haven't, um, spoken a single word... so...” Yamamura stammered.

It had already been about a month, and counting greetings to and from school as conversations, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say she was the only student in the class I hadn’t properly spoken to.

“Yeah. That was out of consideration since you didn’t want to stand out, but did it bother you?”

“N-no, not at all. I was grateful...” she muttered, voice trembling.

Her nervousness seemed even greater than when we first met. To the untrained eye, it might look like she had regressed, but that wasn’t the case.

Until now, Yamamura had quietly suppressed herself, making her presence nearly invisible.

But now, seeing her desperately trying to speak, I interpreted it as a sign of her trying to break free from her past self, an evolution in progress.

However, considering the life she’d led until now...

For someone who has lived passively 99% of the time, being suddenly told to be proactive is a huge challenge.

She tried in vain to move the conversation forward, but couldn't quite manage it.

Morishita probably doesn't know this side of Yamamura, flailing about like this. Passive people speak in a certain way, and until now, their conversations were probably conducted in that familiar manner.

"Well… I, um… so…"

I decided to just watch over her for now. If I were to jump in ahead and say, "Is this what you want?" or "Do you want that?" it would only make her more passive.

"Ah, and… so…"

Yes… watching patiently was what mattered.

Yet, a full minute had nearly passed with her still fidgeting, unable to finish her sentence.

Should I give her a little nudge to make it easier to speak?

No, for the sake of her growth, I should wait here for as long as it takes for Yamamura to speak on her own.

"So, what I mean to say is…"

The conversation stalled endlessly.

There are quite a few students who are not good at communicating, and I don't deny that I fall into that category, but it's impressive how many different types there are.

There are people like me who can't think of words to say in the first place, and there are people like Yamamura who have things they want to say but find it difficult to voice them.

In contrast to me, who had taken a stance of waiting patiently, Morishita, next to me, seemed to have run out of patience and moved to stand beside Yamamura.

For a moment, I thought she was going to offer some subtle support—

"Fwoosh!"

Morishita puckered her lips and blew a sharp breath right into Yamamura's ear.

"Eeek! Wah! Wah! What!?"



Yamamura, who had been seemingly staring at me but wasn't really paying attention, hadn't noticed Morishita sneaking up so close. The scream she let out, the loudest in Yamamura's History, echoed loudly around us.

"Wh-wh-wha-what are you doing...!"

Morishita smirked without a hint of remorse. "Hmph. This is the Ear Gun. Everyone gets startled when it catches them off guard."

I couldn't help but comment, "You just twisted the word 'air gun' to make it sound like that, but... isn't it still basically the same?"

"Now that you mention it, that's true. I'll give you some credit, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka."

It might have been the least satisfying praise I'd ever received in my life.

Meanwhile, the tension Yamamura had painstakingly built up seemed to snap and vanish like it had never existed.

Morishita, proud as ever, wore a smug grin and reached out to lightly pinch Yamamura's cheek.

"Wha-what are you...!?"

"Well, Yamamura Miki. Don't you feel a little more relaxed now?"

"Eh? Ah... maybe... so."

"Tension and release are important in all things. That is the secret bestowed upon those who have mastered comedy."

"C-comedy...?"

"Well, that doesn't matter, so just hurry up and go tell Ayanokoji Kiyotaka."

The rigid stiffness in Yamamura's expression softened visibly, and the flush on her cheeks mellowed just a little.

Despite being rough and somewhat nonsensical, Morishita's antics had an unexpectedly good effect on her.

Her gaze, which had been fixed awkwardly on the tip of my nose this whole time, finally lifted to meet my eyes.

But perhaps that was asking too much, she quickly looked away again, retreating back into her shell.

"...T-today... I called you here because... there's something I wanted to tell you..."

Her voice, though still carrying a trace of hesitancy, was far clearer than before. The stammering that once chained her words was gone, replaced by an earnest steadiness.

"I want to change. I want to gain more confidence in myself and be able to smile in front of people. I truly... mean that."

She took another breath, almost like a diver surfacing for air, then continued carefully, but without retreat. Each word was chosen, connected with effort, carrying the weight of everything she had been holding back.

How much courage had it taken for her to expose something so vulnerable, so painfully self-conscious? She still couldn't hold my gaze for long, her eyes flitting away after each glance.

But even so... this was good. It was already a small victory in itself.

The seed of change had sprouted within her. And with that newfound resolve in her heart, she had reached out to me.

"Please... let me help you. To reach Class A."

"Yamamura," I replied, "you already have the grades. You're already an asset to the class."

She shook her head. "I want to do more. I think... there are things only I can do."

From beside me, Morishita cut in, her tone pointed yet supportive. “You understand, don’t you, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka? This is where you answer Yamamura Miki’s expectations.”

“Yeah. You’re right,” I replied calmly. “In that case, there’s something I’d like you to do right away.”

“Y-yes!”

A simple enough task, one perfectly suited to test her capabilities, and the first step in seeing just how far Yamamura Miki could go.

“I want to know about Shiraishi Asuka.”

“Sh-Shiraishi-san...?”

She had likely been prepared for any kind of espionage, as long as it was aimed at other classes. Being asked to investigate someone within her own class, was something she clearly hadn’t anticipated.

Morishita, of course, wasted no time. “So the man who came to save the class turns out to just be a lecher...? The end times are truly upon us.”

“You’re as freewheeling in your interpretations as ever,” I sighed.

“Am I wrong? Shiraishi Asuka is the class’s hidden Madonna. Surely even you, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, have already fallen prey to her charms. Why not be honest with both your body and your heart? Now then, care to explain?”

> **Translator’s Note:** Morishita uses the word ‘*kakure Madonna*’ for Shiraishi. A "Madonna" in Japanese school slang refers to the most attractive or idolized girl in class. "**隠れマドンナ**" (*kakure Madonna*) means someone who’s not overtly popular but admired quietly, like a hidden gem.

She curled her hand into a fist and began pressing it insistently against my cheek. Apparently, she was pretending it was a microphone. It would have been almost funny, if it didn’t actually hurt.

"I'm trying to improve the resolution of my understanding of the class," I explained. "I've made progress with people like Yoshida and Shimazaki, but with Shiraishi… it's like pushing against a curtain. I can't afford to focus endlessly on one classmate, which is why I want your help."

Morishita tilted her head, as if weighing my words. "Well, that's a very plausible argument. I suppose there's some room for sympathy if you're struggling to understand her."

"R–really…?" Yamamura murmured.

"Well, you wouldn't know, Yamamura Miki," Morishita continued. "You use your low profile to spy on other classes or on people like Hashimoto Masayoshi, the type you can't trust. Someone like Shiraishi, who appears harmless on the surface? You've never kept watch on someone like that."

"I… I think I could try," Yamamura said after a pause, her voice soft but steady. "If you want me to, I'll look into Shiraishi-san in my own way. But I can't promise I'll find anything useful…"

"That's fine," I replied. "Even the smallest detail will do, just find out if she has a side she doesn't show to me or the rest of the class."

Espionage against another class always carried risks. But with a classmate, the chance of it snowballing into something serious was low.

Even if Shiraishi realized Yamamura was involved, her resentment would likely be directed at the person pulling the strings, not Yamamura herself.

And if she actually thought Yamamura was acting alone… well, that would tell me all I needed to know about her perceptiveness, my analysis of her could be considered complete, no matter how unclear her personality might remain.

Since transferring, I'd never worked this closely with Yamamura before. Within the class, only Morishita seemed to have noticed any connection between us.

Part 3

It was around the time I finished relaying the information about Shiraishi, bolstered by Yamamura's sudden courage.

The stillness of the south entrance, where not a single soul had passed by until now, was broken.

From the quiet corridor beyond, a lone figure emerged, stepping into view with an almost theatrical casualness.

Upon spotting us, he shook his head with a ‘good grief’ look, a faint smirk on his face, and began walking over.

“Well now, ain't this a cold shoulder? Not invitin' me to what looks like an important conversation.”

Morishita’s eyes narrowed immediately. She didn’t even bother to hide the distrust in her voice

“How did you even know we were here, Hashimoto Masayoshi?”

“Process of elimination,” Hashimoto replied with a shrug. “I ran all over the school and the Keyaki Mall, you know. Wondering where the two of you might’ve gone together… well, I might have imagined a tryst we can’t exactly talk about.”

> **Editor's Note**: A “tryst” is a private romantic rendezvous between lovers.

“Please,” Morishita replied flatly, “Save the jokes for your face.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Hashimoto chuckled, feigning injury. “I'm pretty confident in my looks, you know.”

I had to give him some credit. The fact that he hadn’t followed after us the moment we left the classroom spoke to his sense.

He’d factored in the risk of getting spotted tailing and adjusted his timing accordingly.

"I'm on your side, you know? You don't have to be that cautious," he said, stepping closer to Morishita despite her habit of openly avoiding him.

"If you so much as touch me, I'll let out a maidenly 'glass-shattering' scream, you beast."

I wasn't sure "glass-shattering" and "maidenly" could coexist in the same metaphor, but the image was vivid.

Although, I had to admit, a small part of me was genuinely curious, what would a Morishita scream even sound like?

"Well, I suppose I can understand why you didn't want me in on this one," Hashimoto said, his tone light but his eyes still sharp.

He shifted his gaze away from the unyielding Morishita and onto Yamamura. Under his stare, she shrank back a step, her eyes darting away like a startled animal.

"So... are you making Yamamura one of your close aides, Ayanokoji?"

"That's not what this is," I replied. "To me, this is still my first term in Class C. There aren't many people I can truly trust. But Yamamura and I have been together during the school trip and the training camp. I believe we've built at least some degree of a bond, and I've judged her as someone I can trust as a person. So it's not about adding her to my side, it's about having her choose to join me."

That reversal in position was important.

"Well, well," Hashimoto chuckled, "looks like you've really earned Ayanokoji's trust, Miki-chan."

"E-eh... M-Miki...?" she stammered, startled by the sudden familiarity.

Morishita's voice cut in, sharp as a blade. "Calling a girl by her first name without permission, how uncouth, Hashimoto Masayoshi."

"You're one to talk, calling me by my full name like that," Hashimoto shot back, "Come on, Ai-chan, why don't we get along too?"

"Absolutely not."

"Harsh. What's it gonna take for you to trust me?"

"Trust is not built in a day," Morishita declared "In your case, perhaps it would be more accurate to say it takes years to build… and only a single moment to lose." She jabbed her index finger right in front of his face, the gesture as precise as it was cutting.

"Even if Ayanokoji won't back me up, at least Miki-chan would, wait, what?" Hashimoto blinked.

In the brief moment his attention had been stolen by Morishita's verbal dagger, Yamamura had already slipped away again, as silent as falling snow.

"As expected of a ninja's descendant," Morishita said with a knowing smile. "The talent clearly transcends time."

I was certain she had no such ancestor.

"I'll be heading back as well," Morishita added, already turning on her heel. "And don't even think about following me."

"Don't worry," Hashimoto said turning to me with a crooked grin, "you're the only one I'll follow, Ayanokoji."

"My condolences," Saying that to me Morishita tossed over her shoulder.

Then, without taking a single step towards the Keyaki Mall, she veered away and continued down the street, clearly heading straight home.

Once it was just the two of us, Hashimoto dropped his shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

"Am I really that untrustworthy?" he asked, as though fishing for a different answer.

"Do you think otherwise?"

"...Nope," he admitted after a pause.

"Then you should be prepared for people to keep things from you, or avoid you entirely."

He winced. "Ouch. That stings."

Hashimoto wasn't stupid. He knew full well that his past actions had earned him a reputation as someone to be wary of, and he had made peace with it.

Even so, he'd chased after me. From where I stood, that sort of move could only bring him trouble, and no benefits.

"You find it strange?" he asked. "Me showing up when I've been told not to come."

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't wonder about it."

"Heh. Yeah, I want to get to Class A. I used to be the guy who thought it was fine to betray my class if that's what it took. I really did try everything to cozy up to the other classes. But now, I'm convinced this class can win. I even threw away my private points, that's proof enough, isn't it?"

It was true. He'd sacrificed a hefty sum, so buying a transfer ticket to jump ship if we sank was now all but impossible. For Hashimoto, that was his declaration, he was ready to go down with the vessel, no matter how rough the waters got.

"You're an amazing guy, Ayanokoji," he went on. "Even without my help, I figure you'll win. I *know* it's smarter not to stick my neck out and get myself hated like this. But I can't help it. I want to throw myself into it and give it everything I've got, so we can reach Class A."

He said it with a seriousness that didn't quite match his usual demeanor… then quickly let a grin slide back into place.

"Not that you're gonna believe me. But I'm still gonna keep tagging along."

It seemed he had no intention of holding himself back, regardless of how people saw him.

"Do whatever you want," I told him. "Though I expect Morishita to keep up her endless… complaints. Or rather, insults."

"That's my only real headache," Hashimoto muttered with a lopsided grin. "She's noisy, you know? So, what now? Wanna go somewhere?"

"I'd like to, but I'm heading to school."

"School? What, the library? Didn't you meet Shiina on Friday?"

"No, she had already gone home that day, so I couldn't see her. This is my reattempt, so to speak."

"……I see?" His tone carried a thin veil of skepticism.

On Friday, he'd let me go without batting an eye, but hearing the same reason two days in a row seemed to stir a different reaction.

His expression shifted, just slightly, into something more doubtful, as though weighing whether I was simply brushing him off.

"You know, you—" he began, but stopped short. A small laugh escaped him, followed by a long exhale as he shook his head from side to side.

"Never mind. If you want to see Shiina, I'll yield quietly today too. Well then, I'm off."

Without another glance, he turned and disappeared into the crowd at the Keyaki Mall.

I watched him go, the faint trace of something in his tone lingered in my mind. But time was already slipping away.

I quickened my pace, setting my sights on the school.

Part 4

After parting with Hashimoto, I made my way back towards the school.

The clock had already crept past five. The campus felt emptier now, most students had gone home, and the few who remained were scattered across the grounds, swallowed up in their club activities.

From the field came the sharp chorus of shouts, from the gym, the squeak of sneakers cutting across polished floors.

I wasn't here for practice. My destination was the library. Or, more precisely, the person waiting there, Hiyori.

It was a meeting I had been postponing again and again.

Friday had only given us a brief exchange of greetings. No real conversation. No chance to explain.

She had invited me to transfer to Class B. I had refused, choosing instead to join Class C, completely unrelated to her, because of my own objectives.

I don't regret that decision.

And yet... something still tugged faintly at the back of my mind.

Maybe it was because part of me had genuinely wanted to accept the invitation, to step into Class B where she was waiting.

As just another boy at Advance Nurturing High School.

Not as a leader. Not as a strategist.

Just one student among many, living an year free of obligation.

It could have been my future.

A future I had the power to choose.

My thoughts wandered back to the end of my second year, to that day when Ishizaki had grinned, grabbed my hands, and shoved them together with Hiyori's.

"...Do I regret it?"

I stopped, staring at the faint reflection of myself in the glass window I was passing.

All this time my feet had kept me away from the library under the guise of 'personal errands' and flimsy excuses.

It was true that the timing had often been bad, with many things overlapping at once.

But it wasn't as if I couldn't have gone to the library at all.

I should have been able to find a gap somewhere and made time to at least show my face.

Maybe... I'd been unconsciously avoiding it. *Avoiding her.*

Why?

I already knew the answer.

Because I didn't want to see that sad expression on Hiyori's face.

Because I'd betrayed the smile she had given me when she genuinely invited me, even though I knew I shouldn't have.

It wasn't logical.

The longer I stayed away, the worse things would get. Her sadness would only deepen. If I was in the wrong, the sensible thing to do was to face her, apologize, and try to repair what I'd broken.

And yet, I kept asking myself the same question, even knowing the answer wouldn't change.

No answer came back. Of course. The answer had been sitting in my head from the start. Pretending otherwise, pretending I didn't know, wasn't like me.

It felt... off, as if my thoughts were running out of rhythm.

I had been the one to choose Class C, to turn down Hiyori's invitation. So the next step should have been obvious: apologize to her.

So why had I let such a simple thing drag on for so long?

It wasn't as though I lacked the means. I could have called her, or sent a message. Yet I hadn't even entertained that as a real option.

And Hiyori wasn't the only one who had been hurt by my decision. My departure had affected many. Horikita and the others in Class A who were aiming to graduate in that class had been among the first to bear the cost.

And yet, why am I— only concerned about Hiyori...?

I drew my eyes away from the reflection in the glass, took a breath, and set my stalled feet into motion again.

I didn't have any real proof, but... if I went and faced her, I felt I'd understand something.

"Ah..."

Just as I made that decision and resumed walking, I saw Hasebe emerge from the corridor leading to my destination.

The hallway was empty except for her. I couldn't help but wonder what she was doing here alone at this hour.

A small part of me was curious, but we weren't exactly on friendly, casual-speaking terms. Most likely, we'd just pass each other without a word.

And it seemed she thought the same. She noticed me immediately, but dropped her gaze, her expression hidden behind lowered lashes.

We passed each other in silence.

However—

“H-hey...”

It was a voice so soft, so uncertain, that for a moment I wondered if I’d imagined it entirely.

It was faint, but there was no mistaking it, the voice had come from Hasebe.

I stopped in my tracks and turned. She, too, had turned back, though her gaze remained fixed somewhere else, refusing to meet mine.

“I'd like to talk... for a little bit, if that's okay...?”

It would have been easy to refuse, but I could see a strong resolve in Hasebe.



She had approached me in the same way at the end of the school year, but due to Amasawa's interference at that time, I wasn't able to hear what she had to say.

If I were to let it slide again here, she might never try to approach me again.

That time, I hadn't yet transferred classes. Now, I had already left. Whatever she wanted to say might have changed, but... it still felt like something I should hear.

"...Yeah. You tried to talk to me before, but I didn't get the chance to listen."

"You remembered?" she asked softly.

"It was only a short while ago," I replied.

"That's true..." She hesitated, then continued, "...But in that time, you transferred to another class. Was that... my fault? Did I make you uncomfortable by talking to you?"

"It's completely unrelated, so you can rest assured. I'd been approached by people from the current Class C even before the year-end special exam. Sakayanagi's expulsion just made it possible."

That was a lie, a harmless fabrication. The truth didn't matter. Whether my reasons for leaving or of betrayal were one or a hundred, it made no difference.

"I see... I get it."

Whether she believed my words or not, she let out a breath as if relieved, or rather, a little happy.

"I'd thought resentment would come first," I said.

“Resentment… no. It’s not like I have the right to hold something like that against you. If anything, I feel like your changing classes has created a more appropriate distance between us. Of course, I’ll be in my current class for the long run, so I get that much at least.”

A distance that feels stifling, even when you’re on the same side.

A distance that feels strangely comfortable, even when you’re supposed to be enemies.

It seemed that was how Hasebe saw things now.

“So, if it's not resentment, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Ah, well… actually—” She trailed off, fumbling for words. Her fingers moved quickly over the phone in her hands, tapping and swiping as if searching for something in a hurry.

“I just really wanted you to see her, Ayanokoji-kun, to see how hard she's working—”

From the flustered motions and those few fragmented words, I could already tell what she meant.

Someone who had left this school.

Sakura Airi— her life after walking away from here.

Hasebe must have some information about that.

I had heard briefly that she had passed an audition, but I only had that as knowledge.

A little while ago, I wouldn't have been interested.

However, through my contact with Tsubaki, I have developed a slight curiosity about what lies beyond for those who have dropped out.

Faint curiosity. That was all. Certainly not enough to make me stop and turn around.

But Hasebe was watching me now, her eyes clouded with uncertainty.

If I brushed her off here, the only thing I'd gain would be a handful of spare minutes that are hardly worth the trouble.

"...Is that not okay?" she whispered, gripping her phone tighter when I didn't answer right away.

"That's not it," I said at last. "I want to hear it."

"Eh—r-really?"

"Yeah. I didn't have the courage to look it up myself... but, honestly, I've been wondering for a while."

Their perception of me was growing more solid, more guarded. There were still small cracks here and there, but soon, prying out information from within would become much harder.

In that case, I just have to come at them from a new angle.

Having thrown everything away and betrayed my class, my position was now a delicate one. It was exactly because of that, that I couldn't afford to let slip any chance to test the waters, to see how to reel someone in, or to search for the tiniest crack that might lead to a breakthrough.

Hasebe's eyes lit up as she held out her phone to me.

"That girl, she's starting to appear on TV bit by bit, though it's in a late-night slot."

"On TV? That's amazing."

Sakura was expelled around the start of the second semester last year. Not even a year had passed since then, and yet she was already on television.

The fact alone was enough to surprise me. I'd imagined her simply transferring to another school somewhere, and settling into an ordinary student life.

It seems she had wanted to talk about Sakura at the end of the school year, inviting Miyake and Yukimura as well, and I was able to confirm that the content she wanted to convey was exactly the same.

Our standing conversation went on longer than expected, and the scenery outside gradually began to turn red.

“Ah...! Sorry, Ayanokoji-kun. I got carried away talking... Weren't you on your way somewhere?” she said suddenly, realizing the time.

“It's fine. I enjoyed talking with you after so long, Hasebe, and I’m glad I learned about Sakura.”

“R-really? I still haven't said nearly enough about Airi, but... I'm glad.”

“If you don't mind, let's make time somewhere again sometime and you can tell me more. Or, if you want to be considerate and avoid backlash from Class A, we can do it over the phone.”

“Of course. I'll make sure Kiyopon becomes Airi's second-biggest fan.”

She didn't seem to notice, but she unconsciously called me by my old nickname.

We parted ways soon after. By the time I arrived at the library, just before six, Hiyori was already gone. The librarian, the same one as before, told me she’d left about ten minutes earlier.

There are two main routes from the library to the front entrance. I’d taken the wrong one.

When asked if I wanted to leave a message, I declined.

“I’ll come again another day.”

There was no need to rush. Sooner or later, the moment would come when I’d learn the answer I sought.

Part 5

Having just finished his dinner alone in the dorm, Kaneda stood before the bright, glass-fronted karaoke building, shifting on his feet.

The meeting time was set for eight, but he had arrived early, far earlier than necessary. His hands moved restlessly, sometimes adjusting his sleeves, sometimes his glasses, as his eyes wandered about the area.

Every now and then, he let out a quiet sigh or took a slow lap around the storefront trying to kill time without admitting he was nervous.

Such strange behavior instantly vanished with the appearance of a certain person.

“I-I look forward to working with you today, Shiina-shi.”

> **Translator’s Note:** Kaneda uses the suffix **-氏** (*-shi*), a formal term used in writing, almost like 'Mr./Ms.'. It's a bit stiff and unusual for spoken Japanese.

He stammered, bowing politely. His glasses, slightly askew from the movement, were pushed back into place in a practiced motion.

The smile that followed was stiff, almost mechanical. But when his eyes took in Shiina in her casual attire, something he rarely saw, he exhaled in a long, steady breath, as if trying to ease the tension coiled in his chest.

“I look forward to it as well, Kaneda-kun. This feels a little fresh, doesn't it?” she replied, her tone light.

“Yes, really. Though I have to wonder what Ryuen-shi is thinking with all this.”

Together, they tilted their heads back to look at the karaoke shop, its neon lights flickering in warm reds and golds, inviting passersby like a beacon. Kaneda, however, barely saw the building, his attention was fixed on Shiina, committing every detail of her to memory.

He had arrived this early for a reason, he'd guessed she might do the same. His hunch had paid off. Now, with twenty full minutes before the others were due to arrive, they were alone.

"We still have a little time before the meeting. I think it might be best if we went in and waited ins—"

He didn't finish.

A booming voice rang out across the mall, shattering the delicate quiet between them.

"What the hell, I thought I'd be the first one here, but you two are already here?!"

Despite there being nothing to be particularly surprised about, Ishizaki arrived with an over-the-top reaction.

"...Hello, Ishizaki-shi," Kaneda muttered, his tone edged with mild displeasure. Whether it was Ishizaki's over-the-top attitude or something else entirely, the irritation in his voice was hard to miss.

"You're here early. I had the impression you were the type to be late."

"You sound disappointed, Kaneda. Don't tell me you—" Perhaps sensing the reason for Kaneda's suspicious demeanor, Ishizaki grinned slyly.

"W-what is it...?" Kaneda asked, voice tight.

"Welcoming Ryuen-san is my job. I'm not gonna let you act all cool!"

"I see... so that's why you came early, Ishizaki-shi."

“The three of us arrived at almost at the same time. So there’s no first place here, remember that.”

“Rest assured, I don't place importance on such things.”

“Still, I wonder what Ryuen-san is thinkin'. He said he's even calling that Tokito guy today, not just Kaneda. He's not a high enough rank to be called to a meeting, is he?”

“I don't know about Tokito-shi, but since I regularly meet with Ryuen-shi, I'd appreciate it if you didn't lump me in with him.”

Kaneda pointed that out strongly, pushing up the bridge of his glasses with his middle finger.

Indeed, Kaneda had spoken with Ryuen many times during the exam period, most of them in one-on-one settings where confidential strategies were discussed.

“The policy for the special exam should have been decided already, right?”

“Yes. We haven't received any additional instructions so far. Or, it's also possible that this is a meeting to report on some other possibility he's discovered…”

“Or maybe,” Ishizaki grinned again, “he needs our strength now, y’know, like when we get together, amazing ideas just burst out.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say,” Kaneda countered, “but not just anyone will do… Don’t you agree, Shiina-shi?”

It was an age-old saying, more hands don’t always mean better results. Kaneda was about to pull Shiina into the conversation when the air suddenly shifted.

Ryuen had arrived.

The moment he stepped into view, the lively chatter dissolved into a weighted silence. Ishizaki straightened, forcing a mask of seriousness onto his face before bowing deeply.

Without a word, Ryuen began walking toward the karaoke shop's entrance, and the others followed.

Inside, the staff led the four of them down a short hallway to the quietest part of the building, where a private back room had been reserved in advance.

Ryuen leaned back in his seat, the dim glow of the karaoke room's lights catching the faintest curve of his smirk as he slid the menu across the table.

"Order something," he said flatly, letting the laminated sheet stop in front of the three waiting figures.

Kaneda, ever the precise type, was the first to break the silence. "It appears Katsuragi-shi and Tokito-shi haven't arrived yet. Is that alright?"

"They messaged. Said they'd be late," Ryuen replied, not even sparing him a glance. "More importantly, Kaneda. Heard from that guy Hashimoto?"

Kaneda slowly shook his head. "No. We were in regular contact up until right before we became third-years, but ever since Ayanokoji-shi's transfer was confirmed… he's been ignoring my messages."

Ryuen closed his eyes for a moment, the corner of his mouth curling just slightly upward. "So, he's made up his mind."

Kaneda adjusted his glasses. "It would seem he holds Ayanokoji-shi's abilities in very high esteem. I've had to revise my own evaluation of him multiple times recently, but… I still believed Hashimoto-shi would leave himself the option of transferring to another class."

"Well, Sakayanagi would've found Hashimoto's bat-like diplomacy amusing, but with Ayanokoji, you never know how things will turn out. If he shows any sign of securing an escape route just for himself, he'll be cut off without mercy. Even that guy doesn't have the guts to cross that kind of bridge."

Either curry favor with other classes at great risk, or commit fully and sink or swim with Ayanokoji. That was the result of his decision after weighing the options, Ryuen answered.

"...You really do hold him in high regard."

Kaneda muttered, unable to fully share Ryuen's conviction. He did acknowledge Ayanokoji's abilities, but not to the same extent.

To him, Ayanokoji still looked like an ordinary student, someone who might have cracks to exploit, not the kind of razor-edged presence that Sakayanagi and Ryuen possessed, which made people think twice before even approaching.

Ryuen turned his gaze toward Shiina, who had remained silent ever since they'd entered the room.

"How does Ayanokoji look to you now?"

"...Me?" she asked, startled.

"Since he transferred classes. His actions. What do you think he's after?"

Shiina hesitated, then recalled the expression on his face the other day, when they had met by chance in the elevator. It was a look that lingered in her mind, one she still couldn't quite read.

"I'm not sure... I can't really answer that well."

Ishizaki shook his head with a wry smile. "That's impossible, Ryuen-san. Shiina's view of Ayanokoji is filtered, y'know"

"A filter? What do you mean by that, Ishizaki-shi?" Kaneda's tone was curious, almost amused by the strange choice of words.

"Well, you know, it's a special filter. The Ayanokoji filter."

At that, Kaneda's expression stiffened, turning sharp and serious as if the words carried weight beyond mere joke.

"I—"

Even Shiina, who was dense about such things, understood what Ishizaki was trying to say, but she looked down awkwardly.

On the other hand, only Ryuen's gaze on Shiina didn't change at all.

“I don't care what feelings you have for Ayanokoji. But as long as you're a member of my class, you need to work to make the class win. Got it?”

Shiina nodded earnestly. “Yes, I understand.”

“Good. So, you’ve had a chance to talk with Ayanokoji since his transfer, right? Spill it.”

“No… actually, I haven’t properly talked with him yet.”

“Huh? Why not? I told him to go see you properly.”

Ishizaki cocked his head, confused, while Shiina’s energy visibly drained at the mention of Ayanokoji’s name.

“I’ll contact him right now—” Ishizaki started, but Ryuen cut him off.

“You’re done here. Just sing.”

As if to say there was no need for him to say anything unnecessary, Ryuen grabbed the microphone and tossed it to him.

“Whoa-ho-ho, y-yes sir!”

Ishizaki caught it deftly, a grin spreading across his face as he thought he was entrusted with the role of the hype man.

After picking his song, the intro music began to fill the room.

Just as Ishizaki’s voice started rising, the heavy wooden door swung open, and Katsuragi entered the room first, his voice cutting through the murmur.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

No sooner than he had spoken Tokito barged in, stepping close to Ryuen “What’s the meaning of this? Calling me out here too?”

Ryuen smirked “Sometimes, it’s good to hear from the useless ones as well. Just felt like it.”

As Ishizaki’s passionate singing filled the room, sparks started flying between Ryuen and Tokito.

“Calm down,” Katsuragi said. “First, explain why you gathered us here today. The special exam’s plan should already be settled, right?”

“The dismantling of Ayanokoji and the next special exam. I thought I'd touch on those.”

“...Hoh. That sounds like a rather interesting topic.”

“Do you have any new information on Ayanokoji?”

“No, I don’t. I haven’t talked to him much recently.” Katsuragi replied. “There’s always someone from Class C, usually Hashimoto, hovering around Ayanokoji. So I'm avoiding any unnecessary contact.”

Tokito on the other hand averted his gaze and remained silent.

“Ryuen-shi. If you don't mind, could you let me investigate Ayanokoji-shi? Since I haven't gotten close to him until now, I might be able to find out something new.”

“Do as you please,” Ryuen replied with no expectation.

With Ishizaki’s song finished, the discussion shifted toward the next special exam.

“In my opinion, the outcome of this special exam won't be much of a problem. However, looking at the lenient reward, it wouldn't be strange if the class points fluctuated considerably in the next special exam. Losing that will absolutely not be forgiven.”

Katsuragi, perhaps sharing Kaneda's prediction, nodded firmly.

"Exactly. Even if we're Class B and Horikita's group is Class A, we're far from safe. Since our last loss, the pressure from below has only intensified beyond the narrowing gap. If we lose two or three times in a row, a tie is unavoidable. And many will start seeing us as the underdogs rather than equals."

"That special exam will be our class's final line of defense," Kaneda concluded grimly.

It was still only May. With the next major special exam slated for June or July, the worst-case scenario might unfold even before reaching the halfway mark of the school year. The weight of impending challenges loomed heavy.

"If there's any hope," Katsuragi reasoned, "it's that the likelihood of a special exam focused purely on academics isn't very high. Studying is always part of student life, inseparable from it. But if we're forced to compete only in that arena, this class doesn't stand a chance from the outset. The school wouldn't let the contest be so unfairly skewed all the time."

At the stage of class sorting upon enrollment, Class A had been packed with a majority of honor students.

That was undeniably a hefty advantage, a large 'savings' banked at the starting line. Yet, if everything were determined solely by that, there'd be no need for competition at all, it would be a mere formality, completely superfluous.

"If the rewards are worth it," Katsuragi added, "then we should use everything at our disposal, including the private points we saved last time. I'm not advocating it, but even threading a thin line on ethics might come into play."

"You're starting to get it, Katsuragi. But I have no intention of fighting within the rules. Whether it's a foul or whatever, I'll use any means necessary to win."

"I know, but I will stop you."

Katsuragi held his ground firmly, maintaining his stance of strictly adhering to the rules.

The conversation lingered, spiraling into an impasse with no resolution. Between their words, silence fell heavily, underscored by the lively noise spilling from the neighboring room where other students were laughing and celebrating. In contrast, their tense deliberation felt oddly isolated.



“Ryuen-kun... you're not trying to force information about Ayanokoji-kun out of me, are you?”

“I just don't think I'll be able to pick up any useful information from you.”

“...Is that really all?”

“Huh? What are you trying to make me say? You want me to order you to use any means necessary, just to grasp his weaknesses?”

“—That's...”

Shiina struggled to answer, but Ryuen already knew her feelings well, the ones which went far beyond simple friendship.

“I’ll make sure you’re useful,” he declared, “not for Ayanokoji, but for this class.”

Even if it meant exploiting those feelings, Ryuen envisioned a future where they would defeat Ayanokoji.

“Yes. That resolve— I intend to make it.” Shiina nodded firmly.

Since the transfer, she hadn’t been able to share more than a few words with Ayanokoji. That unspoken distance weighed heavily on her, forcing her to steel herself.

To Ayanokoji, she might be nothing more than a mere acquaintance, perhaps even less. If that was true, then any lingering tender feelings would only serve as a heavy chain, weighing her down and preventing her from moving forward.

Kaneda silently observed Shiina’s sorrowful profile, as if she were on the verge of vanishing altogether. It was a poignant moment, the first true battle of spirit for a man who had always lived free from the fire of conflict.

Chapter 6: Fortune and Misfortune: Strands of a Twisted Rope

❖

The day was steadily coming to an end, and before I knew it, it was already after-school time. It had been five days since the exam was announced, yet, nothing of significance had happened.

From what I could gather, every class maintained a record of no tardiness or absences. Students were quieter than usual, living their school lives with a seriousness that almost felt unnatural.

Even over the weekend, normally a time when tempers flared and discipline waned, passed without a single whisper of trouble. Everyone seemed to have kept a firm grip on their sense of tension.

Judging from how everyone was diligently studying and exercising, avoiding tardiness and absences, and maintaining strict order and politeness, it was clear that all four classes understood their daily conduct could be the key to the exam.

Even Ryuen's class, who didn't seem to have it all figured out on the first day, had quickly adjusted. Kondo and the others had moved carefully, probing while also factoring in lifestyle behavior from the very start.

I didn't know which of them had suggested it, but in that class, the leader's word was law. If it was put into practice, then Ryuen himself had at least understood the necessity.

Pssht! Pssht, pssht!

Just as I was about to rise from my seat, the back of my neck flared with sharp little stings.

"Ngh.. hey that hurts! What even...?"

Turning around at the unfamiliar sting, I found the culprit: Morishita, standing there holding what appeared to be… a gun made out of disposable chopsticks.

“So you’re still alive, huh. Not bad,” she said.

“‘Not bad’ isn’t the point here… What *is* that thing?”

“A gun. Obviously.”

Pssht!

Before I could react, a rubber band snapped into my palm. The makeshift weapon, I realized, was a crude but surprisingly functional contraption. Several rubber bands looped around and secured to a chopstick frame, with a little mechanism fashioned into something like a trigger. Pull it, and the band flew. Simple and Effective. And, as my stinging hand could attest, moderately painful.

“That hurts, you know?” I said, rubbing the spot.

“That's because I'm shooting with the intention of hurting you.” Morishita replied without a shred of remorse.

“And, why do I have to be the one getting hurt in the first place…?”

Still, I had to admit it was well-made… It wasn't just randomly assembled into the shape of a gun; it was designed to specifically shoot rubber bands.

“When did you even put that together?” I asked.

“It's a secret weapon I diligently crafted during break time. It's a wonderful lethal weapon that can even slip past the metal detector gates.”

At least she hadn’t been working on it in the middle of a class.

“Let's take a drive to the ends of hell together. Bang!”

“I absolutely don't want to do that.”

While we were having this pointless exchange, Satonaka approached, looking a bit hesitant.

“Got a moment?”

“Yeah. What’s up?” I replied,

While surprised to be spoken to by someone I rarely interact with, a part of me thought it would be funny if Morishita shot a rubber band at Satonaka.

But when I glanced over, she had already placed the rubber band gun on her desk and was staring out the window, boredom etched across her face.

Apparently, I was the only one she intended to take on a hell-bound joyride.

“This Sunday,” Satonaka began, “I was wondering if you’d like to hang out with our group.”

He turned as he spoke, and behind him a small group of 2 boys and a girl waved toward me— Yanagibashi, Tsukasaki, and Hoashi. I’d barely exchanged more than a few words with any of them before.

“No pressure,” he added, “but what do you think?”

“I don’t have any plans. If you all don’t mind, I’ll tag along.”

When I gave my answer, Satonaka’s lips curved into a warm, satisfied smile.

Maybe the reason I felt strangely glad just from seeing that was because he had such a strikingly well-proportioned, handsome face that even a man couldn’t help but be charmed.

“If you’d like, Morishita-san, you should come too,” he offered.

“I’ll pass,” she replied curtly.

Without even so much as a glance at him, she fixed her gaze firmly on the scenery outside the window as she gave her blunt refusal.

Satonaka, seemingly unfazed, said he'd send the details later by message and returned to the group.

"Why'd you turn him down?"

"No particular reason. I'm just not interested,"

Within the time it took for that one sentence, she had shifted her gaze from the window to me, her right hand now firmly gripping the rubber band gun again.

"Could it be, Morishita, that you... about Satonaka...?"

Pssht!

A sting bloomed across my left cheek as a rubber band struck me mercilessly.

"Too bad, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka. Did you think you'd get to see me all blushing and flustered here?"

"I thought so for a second, but it seems that's not the case... Besides, that hurts, and it's dangerous." I muttered, rubbing my cheek.

"I simply have no interest in him. Besides, overly androgynous faces aren't my type. Even a face as hideously distorted as yours, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, is better— at least I can offer it some pity. Are you happy to know that I like you?"

"Pretty sure the sadness outweighed the happiness by a long shot," I replied. "Sorry, but I'm heading out."

"Running away?" she teased, punctuating her words with a volley of rubber bands. I ducked and hurried for the hallway, escaping her rapid fire.

Once I'd escaped, I pulled out my phone and read over Ichinose's message again.

It seems Hoshinomiya-sensei wants to meet you, Ayanokoji-kun.

Having received that message, I made my way toward the special building she had specified.

The sun had barely dipped below the horizon. At this hour, the special building was almost always deserted.

Two years ago, this very place had been the stage for an incident — Sudo had been ensnared by Ryuen's trap, ambushed in a blind spot of the surveillance cameras. Ever since, even more cameras have been installed in this wing.

These days, almost every inch of the campus was under watchful eyes, save for private spaces like locker rooms and restrooms.

Some students found the constant observation suffocating, but for most, it was a welcome safety net, a silent shield against trouble that could otherwise run wild.

When I reached the designated meeting point, Hoshinomiya-sensei was nowhere to be seen. With nothing else to do, I turned to the window and let my gaze wander over the school grounds, killing time. I didn't plan to linger here too long— since I'm planning to meet Hiyori later.

Outside, I could see students trickling toward the gates, while others headed for their clubrooms, chatting in small groups.

"—Club activities, huh." I murmured to myself.

In the end, I never joined one. But if I were to start over as a first-year, maybe I'd give it a try. My mindset had changed enough that the idea didn't feel entirely foreign anymore.

To the point where if asked, "Are you satisfied as a student?", I could nod my head, albeit with some hesitation.

I tore my gaze away from the window and glanced down the corridor. Moments later, the sound of brisk, high-heeled footsteps echoed through the hall. A familiar figure came into view, our eyes meeting before she waved lightly and approached with an easy smile.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokoji-kun. Calling me out to a place like this, did you need something?”

“You're the one who called me here, Sensei.”

She tilted her head, a playful lilt in her voice. “What are you talking about? There’s no way a teacher would call a student to a spot like this. I heard from Ichinose-san that you wanted to see me Ayanokoji-kun, so I came.”

I’m in the same boat, but questioning her further seemed pointless.

Hoshinomiya-sensei’s eyes were unmistakably smiling.

While I was still trying to figure out what she was truly after, she stepped closer, far closer, until her body pressed lightly against mine.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“‘What do I think?’ What are you talking about?”

Her voice dropped to a near-whisper as she leaned in closer of her own accord, ignoring my question entirely and feigning innocence.

Before I could react, she wrapped her slender arm around mine.



"Ayanokoji-kun, you're going to have to work hard for the next year," she said with a sly smile. "So I think it's only fair I give you a little service… like this."

To brazenly call this kind of behavior a "service" was just like her, but for a teacher, it was an act entirely out of bounds.

Still, I had no intention of lecturing her here, nor of forcibly shaking off her arm. What mattered most was that I didn't make the first move.

"You're as shrewd as ever, Hoshinomiya-sensei."

I said instead, choosing words over action to halt her momentum.

"Eh? What do you mean, 'shrewd'?"

"I had a suspicion about the nature of this exam," I continued, "but your little stunt confirmed it. For the week, the school will judge us on our 'attitude during daily school life'— tardiness, absences, overall conduct. Normally, these things only cause minor monthly fluctuations, but now they'll weigh heavily in our evaluations. With the countless surveillance cameras in the halls, the faculty can easily review footage to evaluate us. And if they see me in close contact with a teacher of the opposite sex, it'll inevitably hurt my assessment."

Not long ago, she'd been ready to use her authority to push her class to victory by any means necessary, nearly to the point of recklessness.

To prevent that, I had told her about my alliance with Ichinose and the terms that came with it, which was enough to keep her somewhat restrained.

But deep down, her true desire still remained unchanged: a swift return to the upper class ranks and the downfall of Chabashira-sensei's class.

She gave a small laugh. “Ayanokoji-kun, you’re reading too much into this. We’re a team, aren’t we? Why would I ever do something to drag you down? Besides, we don’t even know if your guess about the exam is correct.”

“Of course, I have no definitive proof,” I admitted evenly. “It’s just my impression. But don’t worry, even if you did intentionally try to lower my evaluation, it wouldn’t affect our alliance.”

My words were calm, almost bureaucratic in tone. And as I spoke, her smile deepened, as though she understood exactly what I meant.

“That’s good to hear. So, you’re fine with letting my class take the win this time, right? Just giving a little glory to a class that’s barely a point behind?”

“If we could fully control the outcome, then perhaps. But this is a four-way contest. If our class suffers a negative evaluation, we could end up dead last. There’s no guarantee Ichinose’s class will claim first place.”

“Oh, come on. Isn’t this where your talents should shine, Ayanokoji-kun? You just have to make my class number one, and put your own in second. Easy.”

“Unfortunately,” I said flatly, “I have no intention of interfering or adjusting the results.”

“...Why not? You’re just going to ignore the risk of Class A or Class B winning?”

“This time, even that would be acceptable.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What, are you saying fifty class points isn’t worth picking up? That’s—”

“That’s not it,” I cut in. “I simply judge this situation unworthy of bringing out the true value of our alliance. Perhaps you should start by believing in your own class.”

For two years now, Ichinose's class had been a model of discipline, on par with, or even more so than Sakayanagi's.

However, Hoshinomiya-sensei couldn't seem to stomach the reality of being in Class D. She was always scheming, always looking for ways to forcibly shift the balance, regardless of the cost.

I could understand if it came from sheer frustration, but in a case like this, that approach threatened to smother her class's greatest strength.

"Please learn to watch over them as well. It's something even Chabashira-sensei can do."

"—!"

The moment I mentioned her long-time rival's name, her demeanor shifted.

She stopped in her tracks, slipping her arm away from mine.

"I can trust you… right?" she asked quietly.

The meaning behind those words was simple. It contained a threat: if I betrayed her, she would go on a rampage at any time.

"Look at our alliance in the long term, not just the short, that's all I can tell you right now."

"I see… Well, at the very least, you did pull through for us in the previous special exam. So, for now… I'll just keep an eye on things."

Her cautious nature was still firmly in place. It's a good thing that Hoshinomiya-sensei remains vigilant and hasn't let her guard down.

Even so, there was no real need to push ourselves into a forced victory. If the evaluation truly came down to things like daily conduct and attitude, then meddling too much would be both troublesome and risky.

For classes like mine or Ichinose's, where disruptive behavior was already rare, devising needless strategies would only make things more dangerous. The safest and most effective strategy was to let everyone carry on as they always had.

Part 1

Only about thirty minutes had passed since the final bell rang. I found myself at the library at a relatively early hour.

There had been some twists and turns, but it was finally the time.

The start of a new exam during Golden Week, repeated after-school invitations, and chance encounters. A considerable amount of time had passed since Ishizaki told me to meet with Hiyori.

The moment I stepped into the library, a familiar scent greeted me, a gentle, papery aroma unique to this place

I wonder if Hiyori is already here.

The school's library was vast, its towering shelves and wide aisles making it just as tricky to find a person as it was to locate a specific book.

When I happened to glance at the librarian at the entrance, she gave me a warm smile and then silently lifted her finger.

The direction she pointed was where the mystery novels were tightly lined.

It seemed the person I had been looking for was there.

I walked slowly in that direction, still a good distance away, when she appeared, stepping into view from behind a tall shelf. For a brief, delicate moment, in the near-empty library, our eyes met.

But the moment was gone in an instant. She turned away without a word, vanishing into the shadowed depths between shelves.

I felt our eyes met... but did she not notice me?

Calling out from here would feel like an intrusion upon the silence, so I quietly made my way toward where she had vanished. Yet when I reached the spot, she was nowhere to be seen.

And so, I began to search the narrow gaps between the shelves, my footsteps swallowed by the stillness of the library.

One, two, three….

Where could she be? Surely she couldn't have wandered that far.

And then, there she was. At the far end of the shelf opposite mine, Hiyori's figure appeared in my line of sight.

Our eyes met. I was certain of it.

But almost immediately, her gaze darted away, and she slipped behind another bookshelf.

No doubt about it, she'd seen me. Which could only mean one thing…

Was she avoiding me?

Is it because I'd taken so long to come see her? Or because I didn't transfer to Ryuen's class?

Those thoughts spun in my head as I began to close the distance between us.

If she intended to keep running from me in this library, I would have no choice but to give up.

After all, I can't force someone into a corner if they don't want to see me.

Hoping it wouldn't come to that, I walked to the last place I'd seen her. But she was gone again.

Where did she go from here…?

Then, almost as if she had been wondering where *I* had gone, Hiyori popped her head out from behind a nearby shelf.

She was less than two meters away, close enough that, with a single step forward and an outstretched hand, I could reach her.

"Hiyo—" I began, but before I could finish, she ducked out of sight again.

Although this time she didn't move away; I could still see her hand resting against the bookshelf, and the faint outline of her uniform peeking from behind it.

"...Was I bothering you?" I asked quietly.

There was a moment of silence. Then, slowly, her face emerged again.



"Did you… come here to look for a book you wanted to read?" she asked softly.

For now, at least I got a reply. That alone was enough to make me feel relieved.

"No, I came here today to see you, Hiyori."

"….."

The meaning of my words should have reached her without question, yet she remained half-hidden behind the tall bookshelf.

I remembered what Ishizaki had told me not long ago:

"Make sure you go see Shiina sometime soon. She's been pretty down, maybe not as bad as me, but still."

And then, there was that awkward encounter when we'd ended up in the same elevator a few days ago.

Why hadn't I come to see her sooner?

I could tell myself I'd been busy, that there were reasons… but the truth was simpler: I'd been avoiding her, running from the guilt of my class transfer. And now, I regretted it.

"Are you still bothered," I asked carefully, "by the fact that I turned down your invitation to join your class… and transferred to Class C instead?"

Before we could have a proper conversation, the unnecessary wall between us needed to come down. That's why I decided to confront the matter head-on.

Hiyori's composure cracked almost instantly. Her eyes, which had been trying to meet mine, slid away, and her lips pressed together firmly.

"I… can't say it doesn't bother me. I kept wondering if, by inviting you, I ended up pushing you away, Ayanokoji-kun…"

“That's very unlike you. You should know something like that is impossible, right?”

The Hiyori I knew was always unhurried, unshaken, someone with a steady heart and a clear gaze that saw through the noise.

I had assumed she would understand without me saying a word that my move from Class A to Class C had its own purpose, one I could only achieve there.

Just because I had received a transfer invitation, there was no way I would ever distance myself from her.

But still, the fact remained: I had taken far too long to see her.

“I want to apologize. For not accepting the transfer to Class B, and for taking so long to tell you the reason. That delay only caused misunderstandings.”

Hiyori listened in the silence, taking in my words before shaking her head.

“No… Ayanokoji-kun, you’ve done nothing wrong,” she said, shaking her head. “The whole matter of the class transfer… that was just me having selfish expectations, that’s all. And even though I thought… maybe the reason you hadn’t come to see me was because of something on my end… I still couldn’t bring myself to go see you. Please… let me apologize for that.”

As those words left her lips, the part of her body still hidden behind the bookshelf slowly emerged.

Then, with deliberate slowness, she lowered her head, deeper and deeper, until it seemed she could bow no further.

Even though Hiyori had nothing to apologize for.

That said, continuing a back-and-forth of apologies here wouldn’t lead to anything productive.

"I thought..." she began, her voice trembling faintly, "I thought I had already prepared myself for this..."

"Prepared yourself?"

"That you and I are in different classes now," she continued, her gaze dropping to the floor. "That maybe... we shouldn't be talking so casually anymore. That I should end this part of our relationship. But now... speaking to you like this... I can't..." Her voice trailed off, swallowed by hesitation.

So that was it, she'd been trying to sever our friendship, to steel herself into viewing me as nothing more than an opponent.

Hearing that, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. I'd come in time.

"If you don't mind, Hiyori," I said, meeting her gaze, "why don't we talk about the past month we've been apart? I've got plenty of time today."

"...Is that really okay?"

"Of course," I answered without hesitation. "I came here today to see you, and to talk with you, Hiyori."

When I conveyed my honest feelings, for the first time that day, I saw a gentle smile blooming across her face.

Part 2

We found an empty table in the quiet library and sat across from each other. The chairs gave a soft scrape against the polished floor as we settled in.

For a moment, neither of us said much, as if measuring the space between us. Then, slowly, we began to speak, little threads of conversation weaving across the table, trying to stitch shut the one-month gap that had opened between us.

At first, Hiyori's voice still carried a trace of formality, her words careful and measured. But gradually, her tone softened, smoothing out into the gentle, unhurried cadence I'd grown accustomed to.

"So… even as a third-year, you're still the same bookworm as ever?"

"Yes," she replied with a faint smile. "In fact, just last night, I finished another book."

She glanced toward the shelves lined with mystery novels, adding that she had just returned it earlier.

"Oh, and actually, I've made one more book buddy."

Her eyes narrowed in delight as she pressed her palms together.

"Ever since we became third-years, Kaneda-kun has started visiting me often around this time."

"Kaneda, huh? He does seem like someone who reads a lot, so I can't say I'm too surprised…"

Still, I had never once seen Kaneda in the library before the end of our second year.

Then again, if he's considering going to university, the library is the perfect environment for studying.

“And there he is.”

Hiyori, who was facing the entrance, noticed Kaneda's arrival, and waved her hand.

I turned, and sure enough, he was standing there, looking faintly surprised to see me.

I raised my hand in a casual greeting, and after a moment’s pause, he walked over.

“...Greetings, Shiina-shi, seems I’ve found myself here again today.”

A slight smile tugging at his lips. In his hands was the proof of my earlier guess, a library book paired with what looked like a dense academic text.

“You really do love books, don’t you, Kaneda-kun?” Hiyori remarked warmly.

It was clear from her words that he had been visiting often. I caught his gaze and gestured with my eyes toward the seat beside me; he nodded politely before taking it.

“Well, yes. I’ve heard you used to come here often too, Ayanokoji-shi. But lately, it seems you haven’t been showing your face.”

For the past month, exactly since Kaneda began coming to the library, I hadn’t been showing up.

“It seems we've been trading places. I think we'll have more chances to meet from now on.”

“...I see. As a fellow reading enthusiast, that is nothing but delightful.”

The words were polite enough, but his expression didn’t seem particularly joyful. It was a perfunctory welcome, nothing more. Naturally, whether I was here or not made little difference to him.

The only person who would truly rejoice the addition of a new book buddy was the one sitting before me, Hiyori.

"In any case," Kaneda continued, "you seem to have been busy. Your transfer from Class A to Class C... I must admit, I was a little—no, quite, surprised..... hm?"

His words stopped mid-flow as a shadow fell over our table. I turned to find the librarian standing there.

"Sorry to interrupt your conversation, you three," she said. "Shiina-san, I know it's sudden, but could you help me with something? It shouldn't take long."

"If you're fine with me, of course," Hiyori replied with her usual warmth. She glanced at us. "Please wait just a little, okay? I'll recommend some books later."

With that, she left with the librarian, her footsteps quiet against the carpet.

That left only the two of us, Kaneda and me, two people who weren't particularly close. The sudden absence of our mutual acquaintance left the air thick with a faint awkwardness. It's a feeling I've learned to recognize throughout the time I've spent in this school.

I decided I'd take the initiative. "Kaneda, what kind of books do you usually read?"

His response was sharp and immediate. "I'm not very good at that sort of meaningless small talk."

The ball I had tossed toward him was caught and immediately hurled in an entirely different direction. I'd thought it was a harmless question for someone who liked books, but clearly, he didn't see it that way. Or maybe my throw had simply been clumsy.

"My bad," I said. "If the way I phrased it offended you, I apologize."

Perhaps I'd overestimated myself, thinking I could keep the mood afloat easily.

"...No," he said after a pause, "I should apologize for my rudeness. There's no need to look so dejected."

"I was just trying to keep the conversation going, really."

"I could sort of tell," he replied.

"If you don't want to talk to me, you don't have to force it,"

"...Somehow, you really throw me off balance. It's not that I dislike talking to you Ayanokoji-shi, but... opportunities for us to speak face-to-face like this are rare. Well, I suppose I started thinking about too many things. Until Shiina-shi returns... if you don't mind, why don't we talk a little?"

Seeing Kaneda take a more positive stance toward talking with me made me a little happy.

"If there's something you're curious about, feel free to ask," I said. "Of course, I can't answer without limit when it comes to class-related matters."

I knew Kaneda understood the boundaries, but I made it clear anyway.

He took off his glasses, breathed gently over the lenses, and pulled a neatly folded cloth from his pocket. He polished each side with slow, deliberate strokes before sliding them back on.

"You and Shiina-shi— you seem to be close." he said at last.

"Hm? Ah, we're book buddies, same as you. She's someone I can talk to."

"Book buddies, is it? Perhaps so. But the expression I saw on her face earlier, when I looked from the entrance, was something I haven't seen for the past month. I was honestly surprised. It had been so long since I'd seen her smile genuinely like that..."

"That might be my doing, I apologized to Hiyori earlier, and she forgave me. So maybe you'll see that smile again, both in class and here in the library."

I left out the part about being invited to transfer classes. Kaneda was from a rival class and had close ties to Ryuen. It wouldn't be pleasant to talk about it with Kaneda, also I had no way of knowing how that piece of information might be passed along once it left my mouth.

"Do you realize just how amazing that is?"

"Amazing?"

"You don't realize? Or perhaps… are you just pretending not to? Tell me, Ayanokoji-shi— have you ever thought of yourself as fortunate?"

There was a probing edge to his tone, as though he were testing me.

"Fortunate? That's a broad term— it's not easy to answer."

"My apologies, let me be clearer," he said, adjusting his posture slightly. "Even from another man's point of view, your appearance is exceptional. You're taller than average, well-built without exuding needless intimidation, and you carry yourself with a certain cleanliness that draws people in. You used to date Karuizawa-shi, and now… there are even rumors linking you to Ichinose-shi. The more a man comes to know you, the more he can't help but feel both admiration… and a sharp sting of envy at the gap between you and them."

Kaneda's words were unexpected, so much so that I found myself leaning in, curious despite myself.

"It's not just your appearance, academically too, you're now being spoken of as the top student in our entire year by those who themselves are considered high achievers. I used to take pride in thinking my abilities could match yours. Now, I feel ashamed of that. And then there's your physical ability. Since April, in every P.E. class, you've been leaving behind outstanding results. For someone like me, who's hopeless at sports, even if I stood on my head, I wouldn't come anywhere near the potential you have."

I hadn't imagined Kaneda Satoru could speak with such eloquence and passion, or at such length. Even as he showered me with praise, he demeaned himself in equal measure.

Truth be told, his standing in the year was nothing to scoff at, he would easily place in the top thirty percent in overall capability. There was no need for him to put himself down like this. And yet, he pressed on, continuing to elevate me.

"And now, you've finally unveiled the strength you kept hidden for two years. You've taken the leader's seat in Class C to rebuild it after Sakayanagi-shi's departure. Even that dangerous edge to your thinking, no, perhaps *especially* that— must be drawing people in. You're the very embodiment of a hero. I truly envy you."

"Envy me? I'm just a traitor who abandoned Class A. And the fact that I've held back my strength all this time, objectively, that's more likely to be judged as a vice than a virtue."

"An anti-hero," he replied with a faint, dry chuckle, "is still a hero."

He glanced over his shoulder. Following his gaze, I spotted Hiyori at a computer, working alongside the librarian. She wouldn't be back for a little while yet.

From his words and his manner, I realized something, Kaneda's feelings toward me ran far deeper than I'd imagined. I had anticipated many reactions to my transfer, but his was among the strongest.

At first, I thought his remarks stemmed from loyalty to Ryuen, his class leader. But… that wasn't it.

One thing, however, was certain— Kaneda didn’t like me.

“Ah… my apologies. It seems I’ve let myself talk too much.”

It appeared Kaneda, too, understood how his own words would be perceived by the other person.

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” I told him plainly “It’s up to each person how they choose to see someone else.”

“Even that part of you is so infuriatingly cool, Ayanokoji-shi. Even if you were prepared to be disliked, it shouldn't feel good to be actually disliked by someone. Or is it simply that you don't care about my opinion of you because it's just me?”

“That’s not it, no matter who I’m talking to, I’d answer the same way.”

The truth was simple enough: I’d always acted knowing that some people would dislike me. It was a given.

“—Even if that person were Shiina-shi?” Kaneda asked, his tone shifting ever so slightly.

He had chosen his example well. Of all the students in this school, she was certainly one of the most fitting to bring up.

I was ready to answer immediately, yet the words stalled in my throat.

I wouldn't mind if Hiyori disliked me.

Yes, when viewed from a fundamental level, that is correct.

It was with full knowledge of that future that I rejected Hiyori's invitation and transferred to Class C.

The reason I didn't go to apologize immediately was because I needed to prioritize other matters.

What she felt was a secondary or tertiary concern, placed low on my priority list.

"...Forget it," Kaneda said quietly, before I could answer. "It seems I've asked something tactless."

Without waiting for my reply, he pushed his chair back and stood up.

"I'll head back for today."

"You sure? Hiyori seemed like she wanted you to wait," I pointed out.

"It's fine. Whether I'm here or not makes no difference right now. I apologize for monopolizing the conversation earlier."

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"...I see. Then I appreciate your generosity."

With a faint but unmistakable air of resolve, his footsteps faded into the hush of the library as he turned and left.

A short while later, Hiyori returned, her gaze flitting here and there as if searching for someone.

"Oh? You're alone, Ayanokoji-kun?" she asked, tilting her head.

Apparently, Kaneda hadn't spoken to Hiyori on his way out, even though she was near the entrance.

"Yeah. He said he had an urgent matter and left. He asked me to tell you he'll be back again soon."

"I see. That's something to look forward to."

Seeing her gentle smile, it seemed she was genuinely looking forward to his next visit.

For some reason, I had convinced myself that she'd spent the past month entirely on her own.

But the truth was different, she had been slowly widening her circle, carving out time to spend with Kaneda here in the library.

When I thought about it, there was nothing strange about that. Just as I had changed classes, made new friends, and gradually increased the number of people I interacted with, so too had Hiyori been changing since the day we first met.

Somewhere, she had met new people along the way and drawn closer to them.

What began as mere classmates, or the casual connection between seniors and juniors, could deepen into friendship… and eventually into close companionship.

In the days to come, people far closer to her than I am would naturally appear in her life, one after another.

Perhaps even tomorrow, someone could be sitting in that empty seat beside her.

"…"

As she lowered her eyes to the book in her hands, I became aware of my own thoughts, and was faintly startled by them.

Who's getting close to whom, that was supposed to be nothing more than a data point to me. A detail to be assessed only by its potential usefulness.

And yet, I was engaging in useless and selfish imaginings.

I was trying to picture an unseen someone, sitting there beside Hiyori.

I couldn't explain it— why I could no longer see her the same way I saw other students.

Same sex, opposite sex. Friend, best friend.

Those labels had never dictated how I interacted with others. I spoke to many students, free from the constraints of gender or the degree of closeness.

Whether our interests aligned or not, whether we seemed likely to get along, those factors existed, but never fundamentally determined whether I would accept or avoid someone.

And yet… with this much static interfering with my thoughts, I could no longer deny it.

Hiyori didn't quite fit into the framework I'd been using up until now.

This wasn't like consciously moving someone from one category to another, as if by choice. It was more like something that had been on the right side until yesterday had somehow, without my realizing, slipped quietly over to the left.

Just being in the same space, reading and sharing books together, filled me with a sense of fulfillment.

If I were to describe it in words, it would be 'a feeling of happiness'.

That expression is likely the closest fit.

It's not that we've spent an especially long time together, nor have we exchanged many conversations in a short period.

But thinking back, I had naturally felt a sense of closeness to her from early on.

Her name, too— it's not like I started calling her Hiyori because she asked me to.

It wasn't a calculated choice; it had simply happened, naturally.

Before I knew it, my gaze had been fixed on her face as she looked down at her book.

She didn't notice for a while. Then, in a fleeting, unguarded moment, she looked up, and our eyes met without effort, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Is something wrong?"

"...No,"

My heart feels calm when I look at Hiyori's face.

But saying something like that would only trouble her, without a doubt.

Sometime later, just past six in the evening Hiyori and I left the quiet sanctuary of the library and stepped out of the school gates.

"Is it okay if I stop by the library again tomorrow?" I asked as we walked.

"Of course it's okay. You don't need my permission in the first place, you know?"

Perhaps amused that I'd even think to ask, she covered her mouth and let out a soft chuckle.

"It might be because I think of the library as something like your home."

"Well… I can't exactly deny that. Unless I have other plans, I'm there every day."

If she wasn't here, I could almost believe she'd caught a cold.

That thought brought back the memory of a time when Hiyori had stopped showing up at the library for a while.

It was around the time that the news about Karuizawa and I dating had spread through the school. We were certainly just book buddies, yet she'd still been considerate enough to adjust her visits, quietly avoiding the times I might be there.

"Ah—"

Her soft exclamation pulled my eyes in the same direction as hers. A small handcart was trundling slowly toward the main gate, its wheels rattling against the pavement.

The cart bed was heaped with flowers in a riot of colors— bright reds, sunny yellows, pale pinks, and pure whites, so vivid they stood out against the fading evening light.

We stopped to watch it pass. But the middle-aged woman pulling the cart noticed us and, smiling, came to a halt right in front of us.

“They let me sell here today as a special occasion. Would you like to take a look?”

“Is that okay?” Hiyori asked.

“Of course,” the woman replied warmly.

Hiyori’s eyes narrowed with delight as she stepped closer to the cart. I joined her, looking down at the neatly arranged blossoms.

Keyaki Mall had no flower shop. If you wanted to give flowers for a birthday or celebration, you either had to buy artificial ones from the general store or ordered them online. Which was why seeing them like this, fresh and arranged in a handcart, felt quite refreshing.

Cut flowers like baby’s breath swayed gently in the breeze, next to potted hydrangeas heavy with bloom. A few carefully arranged planters rounded out the display.

“They’re beautiful…”

Hiyori, standing beside me, murmured softly toward the flowers, her eyes darting from one bloom to another. It was clear she was having trouble deciding, her delicate fingers hovering as if tracing invisible lines between each option.

I waited in silence, letting her thoughts run their course. After a while, she seemed to settle on something. Her hand reached out, fingers stopping just above a delicately wrapped bloom.

“May I have this one?”

It was a single poppy, crimson petals folded neatly around its dark center, and wrapped with care.

> **Translator's Note:** The flower mentioned here is 「ひなげし」 (*hinageshi*), known in English as the corn poppy. In Japanese flower language (*hanakotoba*), it can symbolize consolation, thoughtfulness, and most notably, a premonition of love.

"Just one?"

"Yes. I think it's lovely precisely because it's just one," she replied with a small, certain smile.

"Flowers aren't about numbers, young man," the florist remarked with a warm smile, explaining that this was what they called an *ippon-maki*— a single-stem wrap.

"Then I'll take one of these," I said, pulling out my phone for payment.

"Ah— no, Ayanokoji-kun," Hiyori protested, flustered. "I'll buy it myself—"

"It's fine, let me give it to you as a present."

As she looked up at me, I added, "It's an apology, for making you wait a month. Though… it's hardly enough to make up for it."

A single poppy. Less than 400 points. It was a purchase so cheap it could hardly be called a gift, yet her expression softened.

"Not at all," she said, bowing her head. "I'm really happy."

When she lifted her face again, I thought I saw a faint blush touch her cheeks.

Maybe it was the sudden wash of sunset, staining the sky in deep orange and red.

"…Then I'll gladly accept," she murmured, so softly I might have missed had I not been standing so close.

When the payment was done, the florist handed the flower to me instead of Hiyori, her eyes flicking between us before she offered a polite, “Thank you.”

We stood there, quietly watching the cart trundle away, the rattling of its wheels slowly fading until it vanished from sight.

Once the flower cart had rolled away, the street grew quiet again, it was just the two of us. I held out the single poppy I had been carrying, the scarlet petals trembling faintly in the evening breeze.

“Thank you so much.”

“No need for thanks. It’s just me indulging in a selfish excuse for an apology.”

That's what I said, but in reality, it was slightly different. I had simply wanted to give Hiyori a gift.

I just wanted to make her happy.

The urge had been sudden, an impulse, that had led me to hand her this poppy.

She cradled the small flower to her chest, fingers curled protectively around the stem, and looked straight at me. When our eyes first met, there was pure joy on her face, a warm, quiet smile.



But as we held each other's gaze, that smile shifted, slowly, almost imperceptibly, into an expression I hadn't expected.

"Why are you crying?"

Hiyori, whose eyes were faintly glistening with tears, perhaps hadn't noticed it herself.

Her pale, delicate fingers brushed hastily at the corners, dabbing away the moisture.

"For me, until I met you, Ayanokoji-kun, today was supposed to be just an ordinary day. The fact that it has now become a time so filled with happiness and fulfillment that it feels unreal, like I might wake up at any moment…"

Her voice, squeezed out from her heart, trembled as it continued.

"I'm so glad… so, so glad. That we didn't end up becoming distant, Ayanokoji-kun."

Strangely enough, I shared the exact same feelings as Hiyori.

"I'm the same. This should've been just another day, but instead, it's turned into something truly fulfilling."

If there was no falsehood in Hiyori's words, it meant our feelings were mutual.

This synchronization, which should have been meaningless, felt strangely heartwarming and made me happy for some reason.

Under the crimson glow of the sunset, I burned her image deep into my memory: Hiyori holding the poppy close, her eyes shimmering in the fading light.

So that, no matter how much time passed, I could call it back whenever I wished——

Part 3

When I returned to the dorm lobby, the familiar sight of Hashimoto greeted me, slouched on the sofa, phone in hand.

The moment his eyes landed on me, he slipped the device into his pocket and rose to his feet.

“Sorry, Shiina, gotta borrow Ayanokoji.” he said casually, with a light tone but leaving no room for argument.

Hiyori didn’t seem the least bit bothered by his abruptness. She bowed politely, her lips curving into a gentle smile, and gave me a small wave before stepping into the elevator. The doors slid shut with a soft chime.

Hashimoto stood there with a beaming smile, waving back at her.

“We run into each other a lot,” I remarked. “Were you waiting for me?”

“Yeah, something like that,” he said, already turning toward the exit. “Let’s take a walk.”

Without giving me much of a choice, he steered me out of the lobby. We wandered down a quiet side path, far from the usual route between the dorms and school.

“You know, you’re awfully tolerant with Shiina. Actually, scratch that, you’re pretty close to her. That flower earlier… you gave it to her, didn’t you?”

I gave him a sideways glance. “What makes you think that?”

There hadn’t been anyone around when I handed Hiyori that poppy, Hashimoto couldn’t possibly have seen it.

“Don’t play dumb. There’s no mystery here. Just looking at how happy she was holding that flower, anyone could tell.”

Apparently, that's what Hashimoto felt upon seeing Hiyori and me together.

“You’ve been bringing up Shiina’s name a lot lately,” he continued. “Got me wondering about something. And today, I decided I’d get my answer, one way or another.”

Hashimoto took in a quiet breath, then locked eyes with me.

“I doubt anyone else would feel comfortable asking you this, so I’ll be the bad guy and get straight to the point,” he said. “Is Shiina someone… especially close to you?”

From his expression I could tell he was being completely serious.

“Is there a problem with me having someone I’m close to?”

“Not exactly a problem,” he admitted. “But I can’t say I’d be all that thrilled about it either.”

Hashimoto said, somewhat evasively. When I looked at him, he averted his gaze, as if the words had left a sour taste.

“It’s not just me,” he went on. “I bet Ichinose wouldn’t like it much either. Word around Class D is that she likes you. And if that’s true, then she must’ve heard you broke up with Karuizawa and decided to throw her name into the ring as the next candidate. Ever since we sat in on that alliance talk together, I thought the way she looked at you was… different. Honestly, I figured it was only a matter of time before you two got together. Or… are you already dating her?”

“We're not dating.” I said simply.

That should have been the answer Hashimoto wanted, but instead of looking pleased, he frowned.

“…Why not? If it’s Ichinose, you couldn’t ask for a better girlfriend. Honestly, even I, someone who barely knows her, would say yes in a heartbeat if she confessed. She’s on that level, y’know. You’ve got no reason to refuse.”

“Hate to ruin your little fantasy, but she hasn’t confessed to me.”

“Even if she hasn’t, you could make the first move. If she likes you, just go for it without hesitation— ah, not in some weird way, I mean.”

He hastily clarified it, but the distinction was trivial.

“Ichinose and I are allies. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“So you’re drawing that line, keeping it at allies, even in the future?”

Before I could answer, he pressed on.

“Which means… you’re going after Shiina now, aren’t you?”

“I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd be so concerned with other people's love lives.”

“To be precise, I’m worried those feelings might affect the class’s chances of winning.”

It wasn’t about who I dated, but whether I might let personal feelings cloud my judgment.

That seemed to be what he was worried about.

A very Hashimoto-like way of thinking.

“Nah, I don't even need to hear your reply, I already know. You cut ties with Horikita and the others you spent two years with through thick and thin, and sided with us. I don't doubt that your actions would change just because you got attached to one or two women like Ichinose or Shiina.”

“For someone who believes that, you seem pretty invested in the topic. Especially when it comes to Hiyori.”

It was obvious, he was putting more weight on her than on Ichinose.

“From an outsider's perspective, it’s always looked like you give Shiina special treatment.”

Hashimoto wrapped it up saying it’d be great if it was just needless worry, but the truth was, I was already treating Hiyori in a way I couldn’t quite define.

That’s not to say I would ever let her presence affect the class’s performance. But on a personal level, I knew I didn’t want to treat her carelessly.

I see.

“So that's what it is.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I might like Hiyori.”

“...Huh?”

“I can’t say for sure what this feeling is yet,” I said, searching for the right words. “But at the very least, it’s a feeling I don’t have for anyone else, or maybe one that’s just beginning to take shape.”

The cause of unease and errors in my own reasoning up to this point.

The reason it wasn't easy to find was because it was something outside my range of experience.

“H-hold on, you’re serious? And what’s with you talking like it’s your first time feeling something like that? You were dating Karuizawa not too long ago, weren’t you?”

If the emotion I’d just uncovered was truly taking root within me....

I couldn’t help but feel a quiet awe at the strength of emotions and the unpredictable timing with which they surfaced.

The urge to know more welled up, unbidden and insistent.

If I traced my steps back, would I find the exact moment?

Where did I first become conscious of Hiyori?

What made her different from the rest?

I wanted to dig deeper and deeper, until I hit the bedrock.

—No, Now wasn't the time to indulge in such unnecessary fantasies.

To draw a conclusion now, as if merely laying out a strategy, would be far too wasteful.

Whatever the outcome, this emotion was an extremely fascinating experiment, far too intriguing to rush.

"Then… depending on how things go, are you planning to date Shiina?" Hashimoto asked suddenly.

"I thought you believed my actions wouldn't change. So why are you so eager to pry into someone else's love life?"

"Well, just this once… call it my 'philosophy of love', I guess. It's screaming at me that I absolutely have to confirm this."

"Your philosophy of love, huh. Have you actually got the experience to back it up?"

I asked the question with Maezono, the one who had been expelled, in my mind.

"Hey, you're underestimating me a little, Ayanokoji." he smirked. "I'm no Casanova, but between middle and high school I dated two… no, technically three girls."

That hesitation before the third name made it obvious who he meant.

"So? Are you planning to date Shiina? If you can't answer, just say —"

"Dating or not depends on the other person," I cut in. "It's not something I can decide alone."

"Hah, yeah, fair enough. But from the way you're talking... if this is really your first time feeling something like that, then it's your first love, isn't it?"

"...Maybe."

I had no material to deny it right now.

"No matter how many people you date, you only ever have one first love," Hashimoto said flatly. "And almost never do you end up with that person. My own? A classmate from elementary school. Couldn't even hold a decent conversation with her. Sure, when you frame it like that, it sounds romantic, maybe even special... but in truth, it's nothing big. Especially for guys— we're simple creatures. If she's cute, we're halfway in love already."

I understood that well enough, whether the object of affection is male or female, most people are easily drawn to those with good looks. Even on TV or in magazines, the ones who catch the eye and get attention are overwhelmingly beautiful men and women.

"That's why you should just toss your first love aside," he went on. "If a pretty enough girl falls for you, it doesn't matter if it's your tenth or twentieth love, you can start fresh right there."

Even with all his roundabout phrasing, Hashimoto's stance remained consistent.

"First love or not, stay away from Shiina. That's my strongest advice— as your strategist, your friend, and your comrade aiming for Class A."

Hashimoto was clearly on high alert about my relationship with Hiyori developing in an unexpected way.

"It's not complicated, right?" he pressed. "You could get back with Karuizawa. You could date Ichinose. Hell, go after any other girl you want. Just not Shiina."

It was clear that Hashimoto was watching my reaction by intentionally repeating himself. If I agreed or disagreed excessively, he would take it as an ominous sign.

“I get your concern very well. But you're counting your chickens before they hatch.”

“...Can I trust you?”

“You probably won't believe me just because I say so. But yes, you can trust me.”

The truth was, Hiyori had already become someone indispensable to me.

Someone who stirred emotions I’d never felt before.

Whether this was the ‘first love’ Hashimoto spoke of, I couldn’t help but want to find that out.

I want to dive into this irresistible wave of emotion, to be consumed by it, just to see where it takes me.

I want to break myself and her down, piece by piece, and search for the answer wherever it lies.

I’ll remember his advice for what it is, but I have no intention of stopping.

Because by now, I’m more than ready to plunge in, no matter how deep it takes me—

Chapter 7: Observer

❖

A full week had passed since the exam was announced. And now Thursday, the day of the results, had finally arrived.

The only lingering concerns would be my encounter with Ike and the others at the cafe, and the unexpected contact from Hoshinomiya-sensei. Aside from that, there had been no reports of trouble from any of my classmates.

The incident with Hoshinomiya-sensei, however, was rather unfortunate; any interference from her could only be detrimental to the alliance. Still, it also reflected just how desperately she wanted to win.

Nevertheless, this time, the playing field remained completely level. In fact, it was unclear whether any real gap had formed at all. Even Ryuen's class had conducted themselves with uncharacteristic calm, avoiding any aggressive moves against the other classes. It seemed likely that victory would come down to the smallest of margins.

As I was waiting in the morning classroom for my classmates to arrive, Hashimoto came briskly through the door, looking troubled.

"We've got a problem, Ayanokoji, at the very last moment, Rokkaku and Yano are out. Absent for sure."

"Ryuen?"

"That's what I thought too, but… nope. No contact to speak of. They just got sick and came down with a fever."

According to Hashimoto's explanation, the two suspected a possible cause for their fevers: a few days earlier, when Rokkaku and the others were shopping, a visibly ill store clerk at the mall had sneezed directly on them, an incident they believed to be the trigger.

From the sound of it, it seemed to be an unavoidable and unforeseen event. Rokkaku and Yano had identified the cause of their illness and, importantly, hadn't done anything reckless like forcing themselves to attend school. There was no fault to be found in their decision.

"If today's tardies and absences don't affect the results, that'd be nice... but it's not gonna be that easy, is it?"

"Probably not,"

Most likely, the scope of the exam extended right up to this morning's attendance, covering this entire week. If that's the case, then this absence may have dealt a fatal blow to our neck-and-neck competition.

"At this point, all we can do is pray that your prediction is ninety percent wrong, and that this exam turns out to be something completely unrelated." Hashimoto muttered with a wry smile.

It was a faint hope, but one he clung to nonetheless, the unknown rules and hidden content of the test still left room for possibilities.

"I don't think it will be a problem for this class, but make sure to thoroughly tell everyone, not to slander the two who are absent. Even if we end up losing because of it, it won't have any lasting effect on the class as a whole."

"I figured you'd say that, I've already spread the word." He lifted his phone, showing me the screen where a message had just been sent out to the group.

As time passed, more classmates filtered into the room. Upon hearing the circumstances, faint traces of disappointment and unease flickered across their faces. But the expressions didn't linger long. One by one, they adjusted, sat at their desks, and accepted the reality before them. They knew well that no amount of panic could recover the evaluation points they had already lost.

Still, not all hope was abandoned. A few of them, sharing in Hashimoto's wish that the exam might yet prove unrelated, bent over their desks and pressed on with their studies.

Part 1

After school, Ichinose had invited me to meet so we could talk a little about the results of the exam. That was how, for the first time in a week, I found myself heading back to the second floor of Keyaki Mall, to the gym's entrance.

Just outside, I noticed a familiar figure. Watanabe was standing, gazing up at the gym sign. He lingered, walked a few steps past the door, then circled back again. Over and over, he repeated the same routine— approach, hesitate, retreat. No matter how close he got, he never crossed the threshold.

"What are you doing?"

Hearing my voice he jumped in surprise, whipping around. "Wh-whoa, Ayanokoji!? H-hey, long time no see. W-what a coincidence... haha."

His words tumbled out awkwardly, fragments of broken speech betraying his nerves. He even raised a hand, as if to disguise his unease with a casual gesture.

"I was kinda thinking 'bout joining the gym, ya know? You could say I've awakened this desire to work out and get a lean, muscular build? And like, if I could go to the gym with Amikura, maybe we could spend more time together. So... yeah, a bit of both reasons, I guess?"

Neither of those reasons were bad. But from the way he said it, it was clear which motive was stronger.

"If that's your plan, you should just go for it. I'd be happy if you joined too, Watanabe, since it'd give me someone else to talk to."

"R-really!?" His eyes lit up as if I'd just handed him a lifeline. "Then, could you, uh, let me say that you were the one who invited me here!?"

Rather than taking the final step himself, it seemed like he wanted someone to give him a final push.

“Sure, I'm totally fine with that.”

When I readily agreed, Watanabe seemed genuinely happy, his eyes sparkling with delight.

“I'm meeting Ichinose after this, but do you want to join right now, maybe as a trial session? I'm guessing Amikura will probably come too.”

“W-wait— straight into a real debut!?” His voice cracked, but then he drew in a sharp breath and gave a determined nod.

For a second, I thought he’d back down, but it seems he has made up his mind.

Yet, the second we faced the gym’s entrance, his bold steps came to an abrupt halt.

“...Isn’t this a little too obvious?” he muttered.

“Well, I can't deny that. Girls, in particular, seem to be sensitive when it comes to romance. If you, Watanabe, who has never had any connection to the gym before, suddenly join the circle, it's conceivable that Ichinose, or in some cases, Amikura herself, might get suspicious.”

I let him chew on that, layering my words with enough analysis for him to grasp the implication.

“That’s no good! At this stage, if Amikura figures it out, I’m done for!” He threw his hands up, already picturing how suspicious he’d look.

“Still, sometimes letting someone know how you feel can be a strategy in itself.”

"M-maybe so, but I'm not some seasoned veteran like you, Ayanokoji… I'm more like, y'know, a rookie hero in an RPG who hasn't even left the starting village yet. At level one, there's no way I can handle that…"

I didn't quite understand his analogy, but it seemed he wanted to avoid having Amikura know his feelings for now.

"Then maybe you should hold off on joining?" I suggested.

"Mm… I do want more chances to talk with her, even if it's just a little more… but…" His words trailed off, conflict written plainly on his face.

"In that case, there's another way. It's a bit roundabout, but you could camouflage your true purpose."

"Camouflage?"

"Hide a tree in the forest," I suggested, though perhaps the phrase was a bit dramatic. "If two or three people besides you joined the gym at the same time, it'd be much harder to stand out. You'd just be one among the group invited, and no one would suspect a thing."

"Oh, that's a solid plan. You think you can get someone from your class to join?"

"Not from Class C. If you want to naturally slip into Ichinose and Amikura's circle, the best choice would be someone from Class D."

Besides, involving Class C could cause problems once the alliance framework eventually comes off.

"Yeah… that makes sense. If it's a classmate, I can get closer without it feeling forced. But… who would actually agree to join?"

This was the first real interaction I'd had with Watanabe since my transfer. Despite moving from Class A to Class C, he hadn't said a word about it. It didn't look like he was avoiding the subject intentionally, more like he simply didn't care.

“I'm not that familiar with Class D, but what about Shibata? Since he's in the soccer club, he probably doesn't mind physical activity, and he could further build up his body at the gym—”

“That's absolutely impossible.”

Before I could finish, Watanabe’s eyes shot wide, and he grabbed my shoulders.

“Impossible, huh?”

“That’s cruel, Ayanokoji. You don’t even know the reason, and that just makes it worse. If Shibata ever saw you and Ichinose together, the guy would probably cry his eyes out…”

“…Huh?”

He added something under his breath after “impossible,” but it was too faint for me to make out.

Recovering quickly, Watanabe crossed his arms. “Look, he could become a rival for Amikura, right? Shibata's surprisingly popular with the girls.”

“I see. I hadn't considered that perspective.”

It was true, I had almost no information about the web of feelings and undercurrents in Class D.

Watanabe sighed. “But on the other hand, I can’t think of anyone who’d actually join. It costs money to sign up, after all.”

Asking someone to spend that much just out of obligation without having any interest in joining themselves wasn’t exactly a light request.

“In that case, I have an idea. Provided, of course, that they won't be a potential rival for you, Watanabe.”

“Who exactly are you thinking of?”

“Kanzaki, Himeno, and Hamaguchi. Wouldn’t those three be safe choices?”

“That’s… kind of a weird trio, isn’t it? Himeno's a girl, and Kanzaki and Hamaguchi aren't the types to become love rivals, but… I can't picture them going to a gym at all.”

“Not necessarily, if Kanzaki’s motivated, there’s a fair chance we could work something out.”

“…Really?” Watanabe tilted his head, not following my logic.

“If you’re okay with it, I’ll try reaching out to them myself.”

“Well, I mean… yeah, sure.”

In truth, I’d originally intended to use Kanzaki and the others as catalysts to help spark change within Ichinose.

She had shown signs of progress, even beyond my expectations, a progress that should have pleased Kanzaki. But whether he truly believed her change to be genuine, or merely temporary… that was another matter entirely.

The fact that, even after hearing about the alliance, he hadn’t approached me was proof enough that his doubts still lingered.

Up until now, our interactions had been fleeting at best. In the coming months, it would be crucial to bridge that gap, to carve out more time for meaningful dialogue.

No matter how much Ichinose had cast aside her doubts, no individual could win alone. Raising the level of students like Kanzaki, Himeno, Watanabe, and Amikura was an indispensable part of the process.

The idea of turning the gym into a meeting ground with Class D had been a spur-of-the-moment thought, but if it worked, it might prove surprisingly useful.

“For now,” I told him, “hold off on joining today. Give me some time. I’ll try to pull Kanzaki and the others in, and create an opportunity for you to naturally get closer to Amikura.”

Watanabe's face brightened, though he quickly tried to rein it in. "O-Oh. Thanks, Ayanokoji. You really are a good guy, you know?"

With that, he turned away and headed down the stairs. He tried to hide his excitement, but his steps betrayed him, carrying him down in light bounces and skips.

There's still a little time before Ichinose arrives, but I guess I'll get changed and start training.

As I was at the reception desk, presenting my membership card to check in, a student came in behind me.

"...Hello..."

It was Utomiya from Class 2-C.

I'd never seen him at the gym before, but could he be a member?

Perhaps thinking I might be suspicious, he spoke with an uneasy look.

"I was just a little curious, so I came to take a look." he muttered stiffly. "Um... senpai, do you come here often?"

It seems he might be considering joining. An unusual development, given how few members this gym had. Maybe it was about to gain a new face.

"Yeah. A friend invited me a little while ago, so I started coming."

"I see. ...I get it."

His response was curt. It was obvious, he had no interest in my habits here, nor in what impression I had of the gym.

"They offer free trial sessions," I added anyway, perhaps a touch meddlesome. "If you're interested, you could try one."

"...I'll think about it."

The answer came cold, exactly as I'd expected. His tone made it abundantly clear, he had no intention of considering it.

As if displeased to have been caught weighing the idea of joining, he turned on his heel and left, retreating from the gym almost as soon as he had stepped in.

"That was Utomiya-kun, wasn't it?" A light voice called out. I turned to see Akiyama-san passing by, "Are you two not on good terms? You looked a little tense with each other."

"Not really, but I wouldn't say we're close, either."

In truth, whenever I spoke with Utomiya, Tsubaki usually accompanied him. It was rare for us to interact one-on-one, and when we did, the conversations were shallow.

"But I'm surprised you knew Utomiya's name."

"He's been dropping by these past two days," She explained. "I've run into him at the reception or entrance a few times, so we've had brief exchanges."

"So, does that mean he's considering joining?"

Akiyama-san tilted her head thoughtfully, lips curving into a faint smile. "Hmm… maybe. That could be part of it. But honestly, I think he's more interested in his kouhai-chan."

"Kouhai?"

She nodded. "Yeah. A first-year girl he brought along just the other day. She joined two days ago, and from the looks of it, they seemed close. Maybe he dropped by today because he was curious about her."

So, not someone he happened to meet recently, but perhaps an acquaintance from before, who had just enrolled?

"Looks like she's not here yet, huh~"

"I see…"

Still, if they were truly acquainted, he wouldn't need to show up here just to check on her. A simple message or call would have sufficed. Which might mean… perhaps they hadn't known each other long enough to exchange contact information yet.

"By the way, that girl is incredibly athletic. On her first day, a crowd gathered where she was on the treadmill, so I took a look too, and she was maintaining 20 kilometers per hour for several minutes. Even after that, she just carried on training like nothing. Even Mashima-sensei was amazed."

Twenty kilometers per hour. In a normal gym, that was practically unheard of. One misstep at that speed meant crashing hard against the belt, even the emergency stop wouldn't slow the machine down fast enough to be safe. At most, it was something only seasoned track and field athletes, soccer players, or martial artists would attempt, that too, only in short bursts during specialized training.

For a first-year high school student, 15 or 16 years old, and a girl at that, to be able to do that means she's exceptionally skilled.

It was raw ability, something even some of the White Room students hadn't been able to achieve before dropping out.

In any case, a remarkable prodigy had walked into this gym. But, why exactly was Utomiya so fixated on her?

As I let my thoughts drift in speculation Akiyama-san giggled softly.

"Maybe, there's a little storm of love brewing."

I see. Perhaps this, too, was one of those entanglements. The earnest feelings of Watanabe, the subtle maneuvering of boys surrounding Shiraishi. Romance, in forms I would never have recognized had I not once walked beside Karuizawa.

Suddenly, the image of Hiyori came to mind.

With each experience, I found myself growing more sensitive, more aware of the delicate patterns of affection woven around me and those close to me.

"Ah, right... there's something I've been wanting to ask, is that okay?"

"What is it?"

"Well... about Mashima-sensei. How should I say this... Is he really just as he appears to me? There's no chance he's actually a playboy or anything... right?"

"I can't absolutely deny the possibility that he might have such a side," I answered carefully, "but I do think he's a reliable teacher. I doubt he's much different from the impression you already have of him."

"R-Really? Thanks," she murmured.

It wasn't as though any major progress had happened between the two. Rather, it was Akiyama-san's demeanor that hinted at the possibility of something yet to come.

The gym around us was unusually still. Neither Koenji nor the much-talked-about first-year were anywhere in sight, leaving the space oddly empty.

Part 2

After working up a good sweat, I left the gym with Ichinose and Amikura.

"Well then, I'll take a little detour on the way home," Amikura suddenly announced the moment we stepped outside. She quickly put some distance between us, waved her hand, and descended the escalator.

"She was in quite a hurry. Is she meeting someone?" I asked.

"Mm, I think she was just being considerate. So that you and I could talk alone, Ayanokoji-kun."

Whether it was out of consideration for the bond between allied class leaders, or some other reason entirely. Either way, it wasn't difficult to imagine her real intent.

"Would you like to walk home together? …Though after saying it like that, it's kind of hard for you to refuse, isn't it?"

"No, it's fine. I was planning to head straight home anyway. Besides, we haven't even had the chance to talk about the exam."

"Really? I'm glad… that makes me happy," she replied, looking up at me with a warm smile and slightly narrowed eyes.



Together, we stepped out of Keyaki Mall.

It was past six-thirty in the evening, but the sky hadn't darkened yet. A sign that winter's grip had finally loosened, letting the light linger a little longer each day.

"This time's result was unfortunate, wasn't it?" Ichinose said quietly.

"Even with strict health management, some things are unavoidable. It couldn't be helped," I replied.

As expected, the exam period was the entire past week. The evaluation focused on lifestyle and strict adherence to school regulations.

While the precise scoring breakdown remained undisclosed, it was reported that the four classes had performed almost evenly.

In the end, Ichinose's class took first place, gaining +50 points. Horikita's and Ryuen's classes tied for second, splitting +10 points each. My class, crippled by two absentees, ended at the bottom with a -25.

At the very least, it was fortunate that Hoshinomiya-sensei's reckless actions hadn't been counted against us.

Class Points

Horikita's Class	**1240 Points**
Ryuen's Class	**1081 Points**
Ayanokoji's Class	**867 Points**
Ichinose's Class	**864 Points**

There was no change in the class rankings, and the gap between Class A and Class D remained almost the same.

“There’s no major problem, as long as we win in the next special exam, it’ll balance out.”

“I see, that's very reassuring. I'll do my best to help as much as I can, too.”

“Of course. I’m counting on you,” I replied. Then, after a brief pause, I added, “Actually, there’s something else I wanted to consult with you about. I was thinking of increasing the number of gym members. Would it be alright if I invited a few people?”

“I think that’s a great idea. Honestly, I’ve been worrying a bit myself… the membership is kind of low, and I couldn’t help but think about the gym’s finances.”

Her agreement came without hesitation.

“But really, you don’t need my permission for something like that,” she added with a faint laugh.

"That's not true. The ones I'm considering inviting are from your class."

"Oh? Who?"

"I was thinking... Watanabe, Kanzaki, and Himeno."

I spoke their names in a natural, offhand manner, careful not to betray any intention through the order or grouping. Hamaguchi's name, however, I deliberately left unsaid.

But such subtle maneuvers were useless against her. Ichinose chuckled, her eyes gleamed knowingly.

"An interesting trio," she mused. "Kanzaki-kun's been feeling a little distant from me lately. On the other hand, I think I've grown closer to Himeno-san, we've even been talking together sometimes. Back when I was showing a weaker side, I could tell she was trying her best to support me. If we went to the gym together, it might help bridge the gap further. But... wouldn't it make sense to invite Hamaguchi-kun too?"

She had read me perfectly. Not only my intentions, but also the fine details of her class's interpersonal dynamics.

"And then there's Watanabe-kun," she added with a smile. "He just wants to get closer to Mako-chan, doesn't he?"

I exhaled lightly, conceding. "Well done. So you figured it out, huh."

My desire to support the gym was genuine, but she had effortlessly seen through the real reasons behind my selection.

"I can read you at least that much," she said warmly. "But really, I welcome it. Watanabe-kun will be fine as long as I pretend not to know his true intentions. The only question is... will Kanzaki-kun and the others actually agree to join?"

"They'll join. No... they *must* join, at the very least."

Ichinose nodded thoughtfully. “You’re right. It doesn’t always have to be through the gym, but sooner rather than later… I’ve felt we need to truly unite as a class.”

“Then I’ll invite them without hesitation.”

“Okay, thank you. That kind of support from you, Ayanokoji-kun, makes me really happy.”

Ichinose, standing to my right, gave me an innocent smile. For a moment, the back of her left hand slightly brushed against mine.

Slowly, her fingers drifted closer again, until our fingertips touched, briefly intertwining.

But then, as if realizing she had crossed some invisible line, Ichinose jerked her hand away in a panic. Her cheeks turned crimson as she averted her gaze, only to gradually lift her eyes back toward me again.

“S-sorry... I'm sorry. I just... felt like I wanted to touch you... even though we're just friends.”

Even if we knew everything about each other, the bond we shared remained within the confines of friendship.

Perhaps the difference was only in the words we used, yet between us stood a large immovable wall.

It would be easy to take that wavering hand in mine.

I'm sure Ichinose herself wouldn't dislike the action.

Her personality, her thoughts, her body— I didn’t dislike any of them.

On the contrary, she was more captivating than most people who lived their lives half-heartedly.

When I looked at her, she met my gaze with a flustered smile.

She also possessed a large capacity to accept me, even while knowing a part of my darkness.

Even so—

If asked whether I was swayed by the aspect of love at this very moment, the answer was no.

My thoughts drifted elsewhere. Back to that afternoon in the library, spent with Hiyori. Back to the sight of her standing quietly with the flower in her hands.

It was an atmosphere enveloped in a sense of happiness, a feeling I had never experienced before.

I clearly desired what I felt on that day, in that moment— an unfamiliar emotion I had never known before.

"...Who are you thinking about?"

As if slipping into my thoughts through our locked gazes, her lips moved to ask me.

"Why do you think that?" I asked calmly.

"Because you looked happy, I guess."

Ichinose had always possessed an instinct for reading people, for catching subtle shifts in atmosphere. But ever since that night, that intuition had sharpened, grown keener than ever.

"Sorry," she quickly backtracked, her voice faint, apologetic. "You don't have to answer. It's not something a friend should pry into... right?"

For just a moment, a lonely shadow crossed her expression, but it vanished almost as soon as it appeared, replaced by the gentle smile that defined her.

We walked the rest of the way in silence, maintaining a slight distance between us, until the dormitory came into view.

"I'll be waiting for Kanazaki-kun and the others' replies,"

"Yeah—" I answered, watching her dash lightly ahead into the dormitory, her figure disappearing through the doors.

Left behind, I lifted my gaze to the sky, stained with the deep orange hues of the setting sun.

The joy of discovering a new emotion.

The question of how that emotion would shape me, and how its influence would ripple outward onto others.

Would it eventually lead to prosperity, or ruin?

Or perhaps to something neither could define?

Right now, I was living in this moment— fulfilled, satisfied in a way I had never been before.

For that, I can only be deeply grateful.

Part 3

It was Thursday, just past 4:30 in the afternoon. At the same time that Ayanokoji was meeting with Ichinose and the others, Shiraishi quietly made her way to the restaurant, having been summoned there by a discreet message.

Unlike the bustling cafe, which drew most students at this hour, the restaurant, with its heavier focus on meals, was sparsely populated, its empty seats standing out in the stillness.

Slipping into a table at the far end, Shiraishi ordered a cup of tea through the tablet.

The taste was nothing worth praising, just the flavor of cheap tea brewed from a low-quality pack.

She couldn't help but think, if the restaurant had matched the cafe's quality, it would be thriving even at this hour. Instead, the silence was broken only by the occasional clink of cutlery and the distant hum of the kitchen.

Even so, it wasn't completely deserted, there were a few scattered customers.

Just as her tea was being delivered, the door opened with a soft chime. Another student entered the restaurant and slid into the table directly behind her own.

From behind her, she could hear the electronic sound of the tablet being operated as they ordered something.

"Did I keep you waiting?" a voice asked gently from behind.

It was a surprisingly charming voice, unrefined, but firm, carrying strength beneath its tone.

"Please don't worry about it. I have only just arrived myself."

"Are you sure this was a good place to meet?"

“Yes. Sitting back-to-back with a sofa between us, our voices still carry easily, isn't it convenient?”

“It’s true that with so few customers, it’s easy to talk. But on the other hand, that also means we stand out. Anyone who walks in can spot us instantly, it’s hard not to leave an impression.”

There was no nervousness in the tone, but beneath its composure lingered a sharp edge of vigilance.

The situation, where only the other person's voice reached her, worked to Shiraishi's advantage.

No one else, save the two of them, could possibly know the unusual stage upon which this meeting now quietly unfolded.

“Visually speaking, perhaps you’re right,” Shiraishi murmured calmly. “But from this back-to-back seating, no one could possibly infer our relationship. If someone’s eyes fall upon us, ours will fall upon them as well. As long as we don’t panic, there will be no problem.”

To the casual observer, it was nothing more than coincidence: Two students of different classes, different grades even, happened to dine at the same nearly empty restaurant.

The number of people who could suspect they had intentionally arranged to meet and were even conversing together would be exceedingly small.

“Ordinary students wouldn’t think twice,” Nanase said softly. “To them, it would look as though we were each waiting for someone else. But the number of people I need to watch out for is very small. If one of them, Ayanokoji-senpai, were to see us like this…”

“Even if he couldn’t make sense of it immediately, he would remember the image. Later, when necessary, he’d retrieve it from memory.” Shiraishi answered in her usual composed manner.

'On that day, at that time, Shiraishi and Nanase were sitting back-to-back in the restaurant. Perhaps they were pretending to be unrelated, discussing something they didn't want overheard.'

He would begin a line of reasoning that an ordinary person wouldn't arrive at.

"Knowing that, may I ask why you chose to leave such a risk?"

"The risk you fear Nanase-san, has already been eliminated," Shiraishi replied smoothly. "Ayanokoji-kun entered the gym with Ichinose-san not long ago. At the very least, he won't be out for an hour."

Nanase pressed further, "You didn't ask him directly, did you? Or send someone else to find out? Even that would be enough to raise doubts."

The tone of her voice didn't change, but Shiraishi did not miss the faint trace of anxiety it contained.

"Don't worry. I've only exchanged morning greetings with him today."

"Then, how did you ascertain Ayanokoji-senpai's location?"

"How I obtained the information is a trade secret."

It was a phrase borrowed deliberately, one Ayanokoji himself had once used in a previous exchange with her.

"This is very rude of me, but if you used your friend, Nishikawa-senpai, I believe she is unsuitable. If she were to follow him carelessly, there is no way Ayanokoji-senpai wouldn't notice. It's quite possible he would suspect that you, her close friend Shiraishi-senpai, were behind it. Or does she possess some hidden ability?"

A subtle change occurred in Nanase's speech that an ordinary person wouldn't notice.

Only when she spoke Nishikawa's name was there a very slight emphasis.

“You know as well as I do, that she could never manage such a task. Nishikawa is nothing more than a friend. Your overthinking holds no meaning.”

“...I see.”

“It's all well and good to meticulously check for any blunders on my part, but you've been quite careless yourself, Nanase-san. To have your second phone's existence discovered by uninvolved students, and then to be overheard talking to someone who was supposed to have left the school.”

“You're right. I was careless in that regard.”

“I’ve made sure to keep Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san, who happened to witness it, reasonably quiet. There’s a chance Ayanokoji-kun might hear about it eventually, but for now it should be fine.”

“You covered for me, then. Thank you,” Nanase said, her voice soft but edged with unease.

Shiraishi lifted the saucer with a steady left hand and slipped her right fingers through the cup’s handle. Her every movement was deliberate and controlled.


Shiraishi Asuka
Nanase Tsubasa

"Shall we move to the real matter? Contacting me at all is a clear violation of the rules."

Nanase inhaled, steadying herself. "I understand that you've lived your school life until now as nothing more than an ordinary student. But, I also have work that only I can do, so it couldn't be helped. Please… lend me your strength."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want Ayanokoji-senpai expelled, as soon as possible, and at an entirely unpredictable timing."

Shiraishi closed her eyes, letting the weight of those words sink into her mind.

There was urgency in Nanase's tone, but no falsehood.

She tested its credibility within herself.

"…I understand your feelings, But I must refuse."

"Why is that?"

"Because I am only an observer," Shiraishi replied firmly. "From the very beginning, I was never given any role beyond that. For these two years, I have involved myself in nothing. And it is precisely because of that that Ayanokoji-kun has seen me only as some nameless girl from another class, Student A—"

"Then why have you started to close the distance now? Even if he doesn't know who you are, Shiraishi-senpai, he might recognize that you are not an ordinary student."

"That may be so. But what choice do I have? By a twist of fate, he and I ended up in the same class. By coincidence, we were seated side by side. By chance, an opportunity to speak arose one morning in the classroom… Tell me, Nanase-san, under such circumstances, how could anyone suppress their impulses?"

The memory of that morning, just the two of them in the quiet classroom, stirred in Shiraishi's mind, and a faint smile touched her lips.

"I will continue to live alongside Ayanokoji-kun as his classmate. For now, I simply want to enjoy that environment as it is. Nothing more, nothing less. I am, after all, only an observer. Sakayanagi-san, the troublesome one, has already withdrawn voluntarily. That, too, has made things simpler."

"...I see. I understand. In that case, it seems relying on you will be difficult, Shiraishi-senpai."

She reached for the iced milk the waiter had just placed before her, sipping it slowly through the straw. The cold sweetness gave her a moment to think.

"Does Shiraishi-senpai's schoolmate(s) also have been assigned a similar role as well? Are they, too, nothing more than an observer?"

> **Translator's Note:** In some places, the Japanese uses number-neutral phrasing (slightly leaning toward plural but still ambiguous). To preserve this, such cases will be marked with (s) in the translation.

"Who knows. The possibility of being assigned the same role as me is not zero, but I wouldn't know. What was imposed upon us was simply this: to live three years as ordinary students. Nothing beyond that."

"I will take action while Ayanokoji-senpai is still within reach. If I cannot receive your cooperation, Shiraishi-senpai, I may have to find someone who will cooperate."

"Even if you threaten me, cooperation is out of the question."

"But I'm on your side."

"Your words seem a little short, don't they? You meant 'for the time being,' isn't it?"

"...My apologies. It's true my position indeed may be half-hearted, but doesn't that ambiguity mean I'm not bound by the rules the same way you are?"

"Perhaps, but the only reason I agreed to meet you today was to ease your worries regarding Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san. Beyond that, I have no intention of cooperating."

"At least some information, then... Just the name(s) of your companion(s). I can handle the rest myself—"

"If you want to know, you should ask the higher-ups directly. Tsukishiro-san, was it? You already have someone reliable on your side. I don't like him, but that's your concern."

Shiraishi gently placed the empty cup on its saucer and stood up from the sofa.

"I understand that you will not cooperate for now. But there is just one thing I want you to remember. May I say it?" Nanase asked quietly.

"What is it?"

Shiraishi looked down at her, her eyes unreadable.

"If I were to be expelled before Ayanokoji-senpai's fate is decided... things may flow in a direction that Shirogane-sensei never intended. Please, keep that in mind."

"I understand. I'll keep it in mind."

Without so much as a nod, Shiraishi gave her answer and departed the restaurant, leaving Nanase behind with her half-finished iced milk.

Epilogue: Another Story Begins to Unfold

❖

It was late May, on a Saturday morning just before eleven, when I finally stepped out of my room, ready to meet the person I had arranged to see.

The quiet hum of the dormitory followed me down to the lobby. Just as I exited the premises, a familiar voice called out to me.

“Good morning, Horikita-san.”

There she was, Karuizawa-san, smiling softly. She must have arrived earlier than expected.

“Good morning, sorry for contacting you so suddenly last night.”

I had only sent her a message late yesterday, asking if she could meet me. With how many friends she had, it wouldn’t have been surprising if her schedule was already packed. Yet she had agreed without hesitation.

“It's totally fine, I mean, getting an invitation from you, Horikita-san, felt so fresh and I was really happy about it.”

She smiled gently, adding that she’d been looking forward to it.

“But… why are you in uniform?” she asked curiously, tilting her head.



"I have some Student Council business, so I have to make an appearance at two."

Entering the school grounds in casual clothes was prohibited, and changing back and forth between outfits would've been nothing but a hassle, I explained to her.

Besides, students often came in on weekends for club activities, so wearing a uniform today wouldn't make me stand out.

"Wow, the student council president has it rough. I could never handle that,"

Shaking her head and muttering "no way, no way", her gaze wandered toward Keyaki Mall in the distance.

"So," she said, turning back to me with a mischievous glint in her eyes, "What's the plan? I've actually been kind of excited to see how Horikita-san would 'escort' me today."

"If you were expecting something fun, I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. I didn't invite you today to hang out."

I offered the words as a light apology, but at that Karuizawa-san suddenly widened her eyes with a gasp, as if struck by a realization.

"Eh, ah... could it be that you want to know something about Ayanokoji-kun?"

"You're sharp. That is one of my objectives."

"Well, the special exam wrapped up without much trouble, so I figured it might be something like that. But I can't promise I'll be of much help, you know?"

"I understand. But if even you don't know something about him, I'll be able to give up on it more easily."

After all, among everyone I know, she is undoubtedly the one who understands Ayanokoji-kun the most.

"Alright then," she said brightly. "Ask me anything. If it's within what I know, I'll answer everything." She said it confidently at first, but then scratched her head with a flustered laugh. "Ah— sorry, maybe not *everything*. But most things, yeah. I can talk about those."

Her cheeks reddened as she corrected herself. It was a reaction that piqued my curiosity, but as long as she shared what she could, it would be more than enough.

"Thank you."

Her devoted, or perhaps more accurately, *proactive* attitude, brought me a sense of relief.

"I don't intend to tell you clumsy lies or keep needless secrets either," I continued. "I'll explain everything, why I want to know about Ayanokoji-kun, and what I intend to do. I want you to hear me out."

"Of course, I may not look it, but I can keep a secret. So bring it on."

Trusting her words, I brought up the names of Kushida-san and Ibuki-san, and explained that, as the first step towards confronting Ayanokoji-kun, I needed to start by learning more about him.

For that, I also planned to investigate his origins.

All of this, I laid before Karuizawa-san.

"I see, you know, even before I started going out with Kiyotaka— ah, no, with Ayanokoji-kun, I often found myself wondering what kind of middle schooler he might have been. So I understand how you feel. And… sorry in advance, I might still slip and call him by his first name sometimes."

"Don't worry about that. If it's hard for you to call him by his last name, you can just stick with his first name."

But Karuizawa-san shook her head firmly. "No. For me… this is about drawing a line. A kind of closure, I guess."

"I see..."

She gave a small, wry smile. "Even though I dated him, honestly, I don't think I know much more about him than you do, Horikita-san. I tried asking him about his past a few times, but... I never really got a proper answer."

"You mean like what prefecture he used to live in, or which middle school he attended?"

"That... Well, I did ask about his food preferences and what kind of clothes he preferred. That much he would answer, but..." Her voice trailed off, her gaze drifting as if she were reaching into hazy recollections.

Karuizawa-san began quietly recounting the little pieces of information she had gathered or heard.

Part 1

We finally arrived at Keyaki Mall, the steady stream of our conversation carrying us as we wandered through its polished hallways. It might be a good time to suggest we sit down for lunch. But before I could voice that thought, something else caught my attention.

"Actually, there's another reason I asked you to come today," I said, lowering my voice ever so slightly. "And, we were lucky enough to find her."

"What do you mean?"

Instead of answering right away, I shifted my gaze toward the figure ahead, silently urging her to follow the direction of my eyes.

"...Amasawa-san?" she muttered as her eyes fell upon the figure I had singled out.

Walking just a few steps ahead of us was a girl with striking red twin-tail hair, her back straight as she moved through the bustle of the mall alone.

"That's right," I confirmed quietly. "Amasawa Ichika... she's connected to Ayanokoji-kun's past. That's why I've been looking into her."

"Ahh... I seeeee."

Karuizawa-san, walking beside me, didn't look surprised. Instead, her expression carried a quiet sort of understanding.

"Did you perhaps already know about their connection?"

She shook her head. "Nope, not at all. But... I've seen Ayanokoji-kun talking with Amasawa-san before. Just briefly. And honestly, it didn't feel like they were just some random senpai and kouhai who happened to meet at this school."

It didn't seem like there was a difference in the information we had, but hearing her opinion was reassuring.

To feel the same scent, so to speak, is encouraging when you're carrying out such a steady investigation.

“So... are we going to tail her now? Hey, are we tailing her?” she asked, eyes sparkling.

“...You sound far too excited about this,” I replied with a sigh.

“I mean, I don’t dislike doing spy-like stuff. Honestly, who wouldn’t enjoy that kind of thing?”

Well, if I thought of it as just an extension of a play, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad...

But the person we were dealing with wasn’t just anyone ordinary, she was someone tied to Ayanokoji-kun’s past, and from what I’d seen, a person of no small ability.

One slip, and the thread connecting us to her might snap entirely. That thought alone made it hard to treat this as a game.

“At the very least, I should tell you what I’ve noticed about her recently,” I said, lowering my voice.

For several afternoons, I had quietly observed Amasawa-san after school.

She always acted alone. I haven’t once seen her spending time with what one might call friends or even her classmates.

Even right now, if someone approaches her, boy or girl, she greets them with a pleasant smile, but never joins in. Before long, she drifts back into solitude again. It gave the impression of someone who deliberately avoids forming any particularly close relationships.

That preference of solitude reminded me a little of Ayanokoji-kun himself, though I quickly checked myself. Perhaps I was stretching the resemblance too far.

After all, Ayanokoji-kun wasn't someone who refused friendship; he was someone who simply couldn't make friends, even if he wanted to.

"It wasn't all just an act, was it? Surely not," I murmured.

Karuizawa-san shook her head firmly. "No. I don't think it was just an act. If anything, that's one of the real traits they have in common."

Setting aside my own pitiful ignorance of him, it was clear that he wasn't that good at dealing with people. That part was probably genuine.

We kept our distance, quietly trailing behind Amasawa-san as she walked ahead of us. From this vantage point, all I could see was the sway of her red twin tails and the straight line of her back.

In truth, I should have confronted her directly. But the world isn't so kind that she would just open up to me because of that.

Again, this time a male student approached Amasawa-san. The time they spoke was only about five seconds, it mostly looked like just a greeting. Yet even that was enough. Every student who managed to speak to her, however briefly, was worth remembering. Indirectly gathering information was the only thing I could do right now.

Just as I was memorizing his face, the phone in my right hand vibrated.

"What is it?" Karuizawa-san asked.

"Just a moment."

Taking out my phone, I stared at the message, tilting my head inwardly.

A single line glowed on the screen:

I'll be waiting by the student council room.

"...Who could this be?"

It was a short message from an unregistered contact.

There was no date or time specified, but did they mean right now...?

If today's 2 o'clock appointment had been moved up, then it wouldn't be strange for a message to arrive from Nanase-san.

So is this about something else?

While I stood there pondering, Amasawa-san's figure grew smaller, walking further into Keyaki Mall.

I have to follow her, I told myself, But instead, I pressed the screen dark and closed my eyes.

"It can't be helped..."

As student council president, I couldn't afford to act on impulse. If someone was waiting in the council room, then I had a responsibility to answer them.

Even if—though it was a one percent chance at best—it might just be from Ayanokoji-kun.

As a realistic possibility, it might even be part of the next Special Exam.

"I'm sorry. This is sudden, but I have to stop by the student council."

I apologized for having to cut things short without even being able to have lunch together, despite being the one who invited her.

Karuizawa-san, however, simply shook her head with a gentle smile. "Don't worry about it at all. Really. Also I'm not going to follow Amasawa-san around by myself, so you don't need to be concerned."

She had already anticipated the very warning I'd intended to give her, putting my unease to rest before I could voice it aloud.

I thanked her with another apology, then turned my steps toward the school.

Part 2

It took me roughly ten minutes to reach the student council room. Yet when I arrived, the hallway was empty, no sign of anyone waiting.

I pulled out my phone, but there were no follow-up messages either. The silence of the empty hallway pressed in on me.

Of course, it was a holiday, and at this hour the student council room would naturally be locked and unused.

"...A prank?" I muttered under my breath.

Still, unease gnawed at me. Just in case, I took out the key entrusted to me and unlocked the door.

The room greeted me with silence, heavy and absolute. No figures, no movement, not even the creak of furniture. I lingered only briefly before retreating back into the hallway, deciding to wait for a while longer.

But no matter how long I stood there, no one came. Only time slipped away, the minutes piling uselessly on top of each other.

Maybe I should have just followed Amasawa-san instead.

While a little regret began to sprout, I decided to head home for now since I still had about two hours until my original student council duties.

I descended the stairs to the first floor and started walking toward the entrance.

"President Horikita."

I had only taken a few steps down the hallway when suddenly a voice cut through the empty hallway.

Until now, I hadn't seen a single person in my field of vision. Startled, I spun around.



“You're... Ishigami-kun, aren't you? Do you need something from me?”

Clad neatly in his uniform, Ishigami Kyo of Class 2-A stood before me.

It was a name I hadn’t recalled in some time, and an even rarer face to see here, of all places.

I began to wonder what could have brought him here. After all, it was Saturday. Unless one had club activities, the chances of encountering another student on campus should be extremely low.

“It’s been a while,” he said politely. “I have something to discuss, may I have a moment of your time?”

“Of course, It really has been quite some time since we last spoke.”

He gave a faint nod. “Back then, it was you who reached out to me, President.”

“That's right.” I said softly, as the memory flickered back.

That day I had extended an invitation for him to join the student council. He had refused without hesitation, though there was nothing wrong with that. Whether one accepted or not was a matter of personal choice. If I recalled correctly, Ayanokoji-kun had been there that day as well...

“Would you mind if we moved to a different location?” Ishigami-kun asked suddenly.

“A different location? Is it something... difficult to discuss here?”

“I would prefer it if no one saw us. I won’t trouble you too much.”

Without waiting for my reply, he turned his back to me and began walking away. I paused for a moment, considering. There was no urgent reason for me to rush home, so there was no harm in hearing him out. But… the school was eerily quiet on this holiday, the halls deserted. It didn't matter where we spoke, no one would overhear us. Which only meant this was something he was determined to keep out of others' ears.

"Was it you," I asked quietly, "who sent me that message?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Why do you think that?"

"You don't start with a denial, I see."

I observed his reaction. There was no trace of confusion in his expression when I mentioned the message. On the contrary, his demeanor carried the ease of someone who had already acknowledged the truth. He didn't seem particularly inclined to conceal it.

"If you truly had something to discuss," I said evenly, "then on a quiet holiday like this, I could have listened anywhere. Yet you specifically said you didn't want to be seen. If we had met in the student council room, there was always a chance someone might've come by, or worse, other council members could have gathered. And besides, you stopped me on my way back from that very room. In other words, you first confirmed I was alone before making your move."

He must have maneuvered, I realized. Lingering just outside my line of sight, waiting for the one moment he could step in without notice.

"I admit it, I apologize for using such a roundabout method."

"I don't particularly mind. But if this is some pressing matter involving the student council, you must understand, I may not be able to keep it to myself."

The bigger the problem, the more responsibility we bear to make the information public, not just to the students, but to the faculty as well.

"You needn't worry about that,"

I narrowed my eyes. "That isn't something you can decide on your own."

Then, his words came, quiet and steady, yet carrying weight. "What I wanted to discuss... is that you've been looking into Amasawa quite a bit, haven't you, President?"

Ishigami-kun's pace never faltered, his eyes fixed ahead, his voice carrying as though this were nothing more than casual conversation.

"...What do you mean?"

My composure wavered despite myself. His words had caught me off guard, but I forced myself to feign ignorance.

I had never once connected Ishigami-kun to Amasawa-san. Yet perhaps I had underestimated him. If Amasawa-san had noticed my surveillance earlier than expected, she could have sought Ishigami-kun's cooperation. That possibility was far from improbable.

"You don't start with a denial,"

He stopped abruptly, then turned to face me, his gaze sharp and unwavering. His eyes bore into mine as if to strip away the veil I was trying to keep in place, to measure the unease I struggled to hide.

A delayed surge of caution rose within me, all at once.

"Amasawa and I are in the same class. If there's anything unusual about her, information naturally comes to me."

"...I see."

For the past few days, I had arbitrarily analyzed Amasawa-san as a student who preferred to act alone.

But in reality, that was likely not the case.

Was she troubled by me following her and confided in Ishigami-kun, seeking his help—?

No, but...

"You were dissatisfied that I was investigating your classmate. Is this a warning?"

"No. But I do need to know why the student council is looking into Amasawa. If there is a problem with her, the class will be forced to take responsibility, after all."

A logical reason. For Class A, which prided themselves with order and stability, a classmate's misconduct wasn't just personal, it threatened the collective. It's not surprising they'd have their radars out for potential scandal among their own.

"In that case, you can rest assured. She isn't causing any problems."

First, I had to dispel his suspicion. And conveniently, doing so would also serve my own purpose.

"Then could you tell me the real reason?" he pressed.

"Do you know a third-year student from Class C, named Ayanokoji-kun?"

"I've never spoken to him directly, but even among the second-years, he's become quite the topic of conversation as the student who voluntarily transferred from Class A to Class C."

"I see, so you do know him. When I bring this up, most students want to ask me how I feel about it, but you don't seem to be like that."

"Unfortunately, I have no interest in other school years. Now, I don't see how that has any connection to you investigating Amasawa."

It seems Ishigami-kun is only interested in his own class's affairs.

That's hardly good news for me... but for now, I'll continue the conversation.

"I'm trying to find a student who knows about his life before he enrolled at this school. And in the process, the possibility has emerged that Amasawa-san is an old acquaintance of Ayanokoji-kun's. That's why I want to ask her in detail, but she and I are not particularly close. I'm hesitant to ask her head-on, so instead, I've been searching for a way in, some kind of lead that would let me approach her naturally."

"Why is the Student Council President investigating someone who betrayed their class?"

"It isn't something that happens often at this school," I replied calmly, "but once a class transfer has occurred, it becomes an issue that can't be ignored. He's in Class C now, which makes him my enemy. Seeking out every scrap of information to eventually defeat him is hardly strange, wouldn't you agree?"

"So to know your enemy, you intend to step into enemy territory?"

"Something like that. I may continue looking into Amasawa-san in the future, but rest assured, it will not negatively affect Class 2-A."

"I understand. However, I can't say how those around us will perceive it. If the student council president's eyes are fixed on Amasawa, it could easily give others the impression there's trouble within our class. I would prefer you resolve this as quickly as possible."

It's not like I want to drag this out either, but if things went that smoothly, I wouldn't be struggling this much already.

"For now, I don't have any information regarding Ayanokoji-senpai, but I have a slight idea of someone who might know about his past."

"Really? Who?"

I asked in response to his intriguing statement, but Ishigami-kun didn't answer right away.

"I don't mind telling you, but there is one thing I would like you to promise. The name I give you should never be traced back to me. That is to say, I would like you to absolutely keep my identity confidential."

For a fleeting moment the thought that he might demand Private Points or something as an information fee had crossed my mind, but it seems that was not the case.

"If that is what you wish, I promise to protect your anonymity."

"The person in question is a rather sharp student. Naturally, they will try to trace the trail back to its source. When that happens, you'll need to handle that with the pride of Class A, and as student council president. Are you confident you can?"

He was pressing me deliberately, applying weight to his words, ensuring I felt the burden before taking it on. Perhaps to Ishigami-kun, this person was dangerous enough to warrant such precautions.

But really, that much was obvious. If someone truly knew Ayanokoji-kun's past, then by definition they were no ordinary student—they were someone formidable.

"I will do my utmost. Right now, all I can do is ask you to believe in my resolve."

I answered this way, intending to refuse, if he demanded a wager, or tried to bind me into some kind of contract.

"Very well. I will trust you, Student Council President Horikita, and provide the information."

"...Thank you."

His next words, however, froze me.

"It's a female student in Class 2-D named Nanase. Since she's a member of the Student Council, you know her well, don't you?"

A name I hadn't even considered. Someone far too close, far too familiar. For a brief moment, my mind went completely blank.

"...I'm afraid that's impossible," I said at last, regaining my composure. "I once had an occasion to ask her a similar question over a cup of tea. She told me she didn't know anything."

"Or perhaps she simply didn't tell you the truth?"

Not just a whim, but with a tone that carried quite confidence, Ishigami-kun directed his gaze at me.

"...And why do you think that? I can't doubt her without cause."

"Even as a member of Class A, I am constantly gathering information on other classes. In that process, I have grasped things such as Nanase's early contact with Ayanokoji-senpai."

"That's—" I nearly spoke too much.

Nanase-san had been involved in that exam last year, the secret one only revealed to a select few first-years: The test that offered private points in exchange for Ayanokoji-kun's expulsion. She was one of the participants. The truth hovered on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it back.

Not every second-year knew of that, and the third-years certainly didn't. To carelessly dredge it up now would only stir a hornet's nest. No one would gain anything from it.

"During the first special exam your year faced, my class contacted hers to establish cooperation. Perhaps it was just connected to that?"

"We are aware of that much. But isn't it possible that even that initial coordination was orchestrated by Nanase solely as a means to get in contact with Ayanokoji-senpai?"

"If they were truly old acquaintances, she could have spoken to him openly. There would be no need to weave such schemes—"

"Perhaps you're right," Ishigami-kun cut in softly, retreating just enough to leave me uncertain whether he had truly conceded. "If it's only my imagination, then that's fine. Forget I ever said anything."

Nanase-san knows Ayanokoji-kun's past?

It was only speculation, based solely on Ishigami-kun's suggestion, with no solid evidence to back it. But just by having that possibility presented, even for a moment, it was now etched into a corner of my mind.

No matter how unlikely, if by chance it *were* true… if Nanase-san really held that knowledge—

"…Would you be willing to cooperate with me?"

"Cooperate? With what, exactly?"

"I want to look into Nanase-san. Just in case. You're both second-years, even if you're in different classes, you must have at least some points of contact with her, right?"

"That's true, but I think cooperation would be difficult. That's partly why I requested anonymity. You see… Nanase dislikes me."

"She dislikes you? Over the class conflicts?"

"I've had to intervene in endless troubles with Hosen from Class D, even outside of Special Exams. I can't pinpoint the cause, but it's certain that I'm disliked."

It has been proven by the OAA that Ishigami-kun has excellent academic ability. He doesn't seem to be the leader of his class, but if assumed he contributes to the class in a position close to that of a strategist, then it's a natural dynamic for her to be hostile towards Ishigami-kun— or rather, his class as an enemy.

Still, from what I knew of her, she wasn't the kind of girl to extend class hostilities into her personal relationships. At least, not based on what I know about her.

If Ishigami-kun didn't know her true nature, then perhaps his interpretation was only natural.

Or perhaps—my eyes flickered towards him—he simply didn't want to get dragged into troublesome affairs, and was using this "dislike" as a convenient excuse.

Whether he is a trustworthy person or not is unknown, but right now, I need allies.

"...Very well," Ishigami-kun said after a moment of thought. "I can't act openly, but I'll make discreet inquiries, to an extent that my identity is not discovered. I'll also consider the possibility that Nanase is uninvolved, and instead check on Amasawa... or anyone else who might know something about Ayanokoji-senpai. As for you, President Horikita, just keep your promise with me, and proceed with your investigation freely."

"Yes, thank you. Even if I'm pressed, I will protect you at all costs."

"I'm looking forward to seeing the results. Well then,"

Ishigami-kun said softly before turning his back. He walked away, not toward the entrance, but deliberately in the opposite direction. Perhaps it was a caution, so that Nanase-san would not, even by the slightest chance, catch sight of him together with me.

The more I try to uncover the truth about Ayanokoji-kun, the more I feel myself sinking, as though into a bottomless swamp.

"Ayanokoji-kun... just who are you...?" I whispered into the empty air.

Even so, I had no choice but to recklessly wade through the mud, chasing after the silhouette of his back.

But at that moment, even as I renewed my resolve, I still knew nothing.

Nothing of Ayanokoji-kun's true origin.

Nothing of the existence of that harsh and unreal facility, where ordinary imagination could never reach, nor of the education it imposed.

Nothing of how, among countless children broken and discarded one after another, he alone endured.

Nothing of the cruel fate that awaited him ahead in life.

Surely, this was the turning point.

My reunion with him, Ishigami-kun, marked the beginning of a profound irreversible change in my life.

It was the start of my deep entanglement with the life of one man—Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

An encounter orchestrated from the shadows.

Ichinose SS

I love you too much...

❖

From what Hoshinomiya-sensei said, I could already deduce that the special exam will be about how well we can conform to the rules that have been in place since we first entered school, and Ayanokoji-kun's advice made me even more sure of this.

Ever since the first day of our alliance, both of our classes have deliberately kept their distance from one-another.

If Ryuen-kun tried to use his classmates to cause some disruption among us, being seen together would only invite suspicion on both of our classes at once.

Whether it was thanks to that precaution, or because Ryuen-kun simply changed his methods, I don't know. But we managed to live an ordinary school life for a week without incident.

But even then, to me, that single week felt unbearably long.

The time I couldn't see Ayanokoji-kun. Even though we kept in touch through our phones, not being able to meet face-to-face, not being able to feel each others' breath—my heart screamed in protest.

That's why, when the special exam ended today, I invited him to the gym, regardless of how the exam went, so I could spend time with him.

On the way back, recharged with happiness after finally being with him again, Ayanokoji-kun mentioned wanting to invite new members to come to the gym. Though his intentions were obvious, I didn't think it was a bad idea. If it meant more opportunities to interact with Kanzaki-kun and others, then surely our class could only grow stronger.

“Then I’ll invite them without hesitation.”

Ayanokoji-kun replied seeing my welcoming attitude.

“Okay, thank you. That kind of support from you, Ayanokoji-kun, makes me really happy.”

With each step, we drew closer and closer to the dorms.

It will soon be time to say goodbye to him.

Our connection doesn't have to be deep—

But still...

Nervously, I let the back of my left hand brush against the back of Ayanokoji-kun’s right hand.

He didn’t pull away. My fingers grazed against his, almost intertwining...

Realizing the urge quickly rising within me, I hurriedly pulled back my hand.

“S-sorry... I'm sorry. I just... felt like I wanted to touch you... even though we're just friends.”

No. I can’t be the only one consumed by this feeling.

Until the day comes when Ayanokoji-kun reaches out for me as well, I have to be by his side as just an equal.

I never knew that loving someone too much could be this painful.

That was the thought that filled me, as I gazed deep into Ayanokoji-kun’s eyes—

Morishita SS

Ear Gun

❖

"Um... I-I, well... it's just that..."

Right in front of me was Miki Yamamura, whining and grumbling, sniffling and squirming.

She just couldn't get to the point.

What annoyed me more, though, was Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, simply watching over her quietly like some benevolent father patiently waiting for his daughter to grow up.

"So... what I mean to say is..."

In this world, time is money. And since I plan to spend this afternoon outside indulging in a bit of people-watching, I'd really like to get this over with quickly.

Besides, parenting isn't just about watching over them, you know.

As someone who has successfully raised tadpole shrimps, I know that well.

I moved quietly, slipping into position beside her without her even noticing. Her entire field of vision was locked on Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, blind to everything else.

Oh dear, someone who prides herself on her ability to shadow people to be flanked so easily, embarrassing.

For such a careless girl, I'll let her taste one of my special techniques.

I pursed my lips, gathered my peach-scented breath, and aimed squarely at her exposed ear.

“Fwooosh!”

She let out a shriek unlike anything I’d ever heard, proof that my attack had succeeded brilliantly.

“Hya-wawa-wahhh!”

“Wh-wh-wha-what are you doing...!”

“Hmph. This is the Ear Gun. Everyone gets startled when it catches them off guard.”

“You just twisted the word ‘air gun’ to make it sound like that, but... isn’t it still basically the same?”

Indeed, the power of the Ear Gun lay in the element of air. For him to realize the truth behind my special move in an instant....

“Now that you mention it, that's true. I’ll give you some credit, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.”

However, this secret technique wasn’t just for show.

It was to push Yamamura Miki forward, frozen as she was by nerves.

As a finishing touch, I gave her cheek a little pinch.

“Wha-what are you...!?”

“Well, Yamamura Miki. Don’t you feel a little more relaxed now?”

By making her pause and reflect, she should now be able to take at least one step forward.

And so, once again, I lend my aid to those around me.

What a remarkable person I am. Sometimes my genius is.. It's almost frightening—

Hiyori SS

A Swaying Heart

❖

When I returned to my dorm room, I sank gently onto the bed, as if lowering myself to rest.

In my hands, I held a single poppy. Simply gazing at it stirred a quiet warmth that gently overflowed within my heart.

At the same time, the image of Ayanokoji-kun in the library came rushing back. I had only just resolved to convince myself that I disliked him, yet in that very moment, he had told me he wanted to see me again tomorrow.

With just those words, my resolve to cut ties with him… had already scattered like dust in the wind.

“To feel this fulfilled,” I whispered, “It’s almost frightening…”

Though my heart had been in such turmoil today, yet, somehow, the day had turned into something wonderful.

Even I was stunned by the depth of the emotions I had harbored all this time. I already knew the truth: I have fallen in love with Ayanokoji-kun—as a man, as someone of the opposite sex.

I twirled the delicate flower between my fingers, letting a soft sigh slip free.

“It’s alright… isn’t it? For me to keep on loving him like this…?”

I asked the question to the poppy in my hand, though it would never answer me.

Ayanokoji-kun has already broken up with Karuizawa-san.

So, technically, there was nothing wrong with me feeling this way.

But I don't have the courage to confess my feelings, and above all, our classes are still separate.

As we compete for Class A from now on, this feeling probably won't lead in a good direction.

While still in love with him, will I be able to fight against Ayanokoji-kun's class...?

“I..” The word fell from my lips and dissolved into the still air of the room.

I shook my head.

I shouldn’t be greedy. I should remain content with just being a precious friend.

It’s wrong to desire anything beyond that.

Besides, there’s no guarantee that Ayanokoji-kun even sees me that way at all.

Just as things are now.

Just like this.

Not too close, not too far.

I think it would be better for my first love to end just like that, faintly.

“Surely... that's the right answer, isn't it?”

To the poppy flower, I asked just one more time.

Shiraishi SS

A Voice Hidden Within

❖

Over two long years of school life, there had always been one truth I both dreaded and yearned for. I told myself I must never hear those words, and yet, a part of me longed for nothing more than to hear them.

“You might say I'm being self-conscious, but is it possible that you were watching me to some extent even before I transferred classes, Shiraishi?”

The weight of his gaze and the steady timbre of his voice pierced through me.

“Aah—”

I’ve been found out. I’ve been seen.

My mind churned with contradictions— I could make excuses. I could spin a web of words to cover myself. But I knew that would be unforgivable.

“Ah... this isn’t good.”

I had a duty. A mission as an observer. To answer the expectations of Shirogane-sensei, I had walked the same path, repeating the same role, day after day.

That day, in that room, summoned on the eve of graduation—My mission began from the very day I came to know about you...

“Not good? What do you mean?”

There was nothing different about Ayanokoji-kun's voice.

It wasn't that he had reached a firm conclusion, but rather, my own unrestrainable gaze and gestures must have given rise to his question.

Please... forgive me. Just for now, just for this fleeting moment, allow me to forget that role.

"I am Shiraishi Asuka."

Until now, every word I had spoken had been a lie. That is why, at the very least, I wanted to let this one truth pass my lips: a simple introduction, spoken from the heart.

"And you— who are you?"

Would he answer me?

To this question—to the voice of my very first self-introduction, long kept hidden within—

Bonus SS

The 6 freshmen

❖

> **Note**: This short story isn't from the current volume. It originally belongs to Year 2 Volume 2, but it was only just released now alongside the manga adaptation that's covering that volume. So while the content is tied to Year 2 Volume 2, this is technically new short story material we've just received.

Tsubaki gazed out the window from inside the cafe. Her expression carried a trace of seriousness, yet also a touch of fleeting fragility.

At the end of her gaze, walking at a steady pace, was the second-year student Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

"Do you want to rise to Class A, Tsubaki?" a voice beside her asked.

"...Not really," she replied softly, eyes still lingering on the figure outside. "But if that's considered the ultimate goal of this school, then isn't it the duty of every student to give their all toward it?"

Utomiya, seated beside her, gave a faint shrug. "We haven't known each other long, but... you don't seem like the type to live by duty."

"Maybe, but aren't you the same, Utomiya-kun? You don't look like you care much about Class A or special privileges either."

Her gaze left Ayanokoji and turned to the boy at her side. Utomiya, caught in the moment, averted his eyes to the window with an awkward look.

"Hosen and Nanase."

"Hnn?"

Following Utomiya's attempt to change the subject, his gaze fell on two first-years from Class 1-D, who were about to pass by Ayanokoji.

For a moment, it looked like something might happen. But in the end, all that passed between them was a polite bow from Nanase.

"Was it a coincidence, or not?" Tsubaki murmured.

"Hard to say from that alone," Utomiya replied, though his eyes narrowed. "But Ayanokoji's bandaged left hand… it bothers me."

"He was wearing one?" She hadn't noticed.

"Maybe something's already happened. With Hosen's personality, it wouldn't surprise me if he picked a fight."

"And Ayanokoji-senpai got injured? Hosen-kun looked unharmed though."

"If they've indeed clashed, Ayanokoji probably didn't fight back. Hurting the opponent recklessly would carry too much risk."

"Huh? But wouldn't that require a certain level of skill from Ayanokoji-senpai?"

"His real fighting strength is unknown," Utomiya admitted, "but I can't imagine him losing to Hosen. Just by observing his demeanor and presence, you can sense it."

"You mean… Hosen-level? Are you serious? He acts like he can run wild however he likes."

What surprised Tsubaki was not the high evaluation given to Ayanokoji, but how low Hosen was placed.

"That's only because the ones around him are weak. …Probably."

Realizing he said too much, Utomiya trailed off, interrupting himself.

Men, Tsubaki thought, are creatures who put up a tough front. Most of them believe they are stronger than their adversary.

Perhaps it was entirely possible that Utomiya's remark was just bravado, or an inflated self-assessment, but he wasn't the kind to usually posture in that way.

Tsubaki, for the first time, felt a slight interest swell up within her towards her classmate, Utomiya.

"Maybe I want to know a little more about you, Utomiya-kun."

"Stop it. I don't pry into anyone's business, and I don't want anyone prying into mine."

Before the air between them could settle, a playful voice cut through.

"Aah~ what's this atmosphere? Could it be… you two are dating?"

A shadow fell across their table. A girl with an easy smile and mischievous eyes leaned in. It was Amasawa from Class 1-A.

"We are not." Utomiya denied immediately.

He cut her off without hesitation, and Tsubaki, looking rather uninterested, nodded in agreement.

"Really? You seemed pretty close, though~." Amasawa's teasing only grew bolder.

"You're imagining things. Did you come here just to throw out nonsense like that? Or were you hoping to dig something out of us?"

His sharp tone only made Amasawa smile wider. "Oh, don't be so cold. I don't mean anything by it. Even if we're in different classes, we're still all first-years, aren't we? We should get along. Right, Tsubaki-chan?"

"Sorry, but I'll pass. I'm not exactly looking for friends."

"Ouch, harsh~." Amasawa replied sweetly, as if the rejection rolled right off her back.

"Then maybe I'll save deepening our friendship for another time. See you, Tsubaki-chan, Utomiya-kun."

With that, she blew them a little kiss before turning her back and leaving.

"Amasawa-san doesn't know about the special exam… right?"

"She shouldn't. Only Takahashi and Ishigami are aware. But even if she doesn't know the details, it's possible they asked her to probe around for information."

"I see."

"Still, a secret special exam to target one individual—Ayanokoji alone—that's strange."

"Maybe it's something normal in this school and we just haven't heard of it."

"..If that's the case, then it's even more messed up."

"Hello, Utomiya-kun. And you too, Tsubaki-san."

The new voice came from a short distance away. Yagami from Class 1-B, who had also come to the cafe, stopped and approached them.

"Yagami," Utomiya muttered. "Speak of the devil. We were just talking about the exam."

"Not surprising, is it? The number of private points at stake is on a whole different level."

"Do you mind if I join in on your conversation?"

"It was just boring small talk," Tsubaki replied flatly.

"It didn't seem that way. You seemed to be watching Ayanokoji-senpai and Hosen-kun."

"Oh?" Tsubaki's lips curled faintly. "So you've been watching us for quite a while, then."

"Pure coincidence," Yagami said smoothly.

"Doesn't matter. We're enemies all the same," Utomiya said flatly.

"Precisely because we're enemies, there's meaning in talking," Yagami replied.

Utomiya. Tsubaki. Hosen. Nanase. Yagami.

Five first-years whose orbits were beginning to draw together.

And though Tsubaki and Utomiya could not yet realize it, even Amasawa was entangled in the threads of this peculiar special exam.

All of them shared a single target: Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

And from this quiet cafe, from this seemingly idle gathering, the story would soon stretch forward—toward the coming trial on a deserted island, where everything would begin.

Afterword

❖

These days, a year passes by in the blink of an eye. This is Kinugasa.

I'm getting older, and my old hernia has started to flare up again, so I can't exactly claim I'm in perfect health. But aside from that, I've actually been feeling healthier with each passing year. My blood pressure and other numbers that were once a little concerning have all steadily improved, settling nicely into "age-appropriate" territory. Really, it's just the hernia left, that's one thing that can't be helped, but I'll keep doing my best.

As for what comes next, Volume 3 will move us into early summer a bit ahead of schedule. That means the usual "event" everyone expects will be arriving sooner than planned.

Unlike Volume 2, which leaned more toward a heartwarming, easygoing atmosphere, this next installment might take on a sharper edge. But since it's me saying this, you might want to take it with a grain of salt.

I keep thinking the conclusion is still far away, and yet… realizing that the first semester is already approaching its end makes me feel the story is moving faster than I expected. Since I prefer not to spoil much about the main plot or what's coming, I'll leave it at that for now.

So instead, let me drift into something more trivial—my personal life. Feel free to skip ahead. (This is just me filling space.)

I really feel my age when I notice how far I've drifted away from playing games. To put it simply, games like Mario Kart or Smash Bros, ones I used to play endlessly, now leave me satisfied after just a few minutes of playing with my kids. On my phone, the only game I even have installed is 'YouZitsu'; nothing else.

There was a time when I couldn't imagine not playing games. "What else would you do?" I thought. But now... before I know it, the whole day is over without me touching a single one!

Meanwhile, my children continue to grow up so quickly, right before my eyes. I can already feel time accelerating with each passing year, as if Janet's Law itself is pressing down on me, reminding me that the older I get, the faster the days will flow.

Well then, everyone—

I look forward to seeing you again later this year.

That is, unless something truly troublesome happens. Something really troublesome... right!



Translation Team's Afterword

From the Translation Team

❖

First off, thank you for picking up this volume and spending your time with our translation. If you're reading this on PDF or EPUB, do drop by our website too! We have a dedicated reading page where you can leave paragraph comments. Yep, you can now scream "Kiyo, you absolute madman!" or "No way she just said that!" right next to the scene itself. And that's just the start, expect more fun features to roll out in the future, so stay tuned!

Now, about the delay this time... We truly appreciate your patience. For this release, we've been experimenting with a new translation framework, particularly on the editing side. The goal was to make the output feel more fluid and natural, closer to a proper novel rather than just a straightforward translation. It took us a bit longer to fine-tune, but we believe the results were worth it.

By the way, we're also working on the Year 2 manga! If you want more Classroom of the Elite (with pictures this time), check it out on Mangadex or Comick. And while you're at it, make sure to check out our Discord server. It's where you can hang out with fellow fans, discuss theories, and get updates on our projects before anyone else. We are also planning some fun events there.

From here, there's plenty to look forward to as the Year 3 arc continues. Until then, we hope you enjoyed this release as much as we enjoyed working on it. See you in the next volume! And goodbye for now!

❖

Credits

Akiso

Lead

Shiina winning?! This volume was a huge leap forward for Ayanokoji's emotions, so much so that at times it felt almost unreal. I can't wait to see what's next! And with the next volume most likely featuring THE ISLAND EXAM, the hype is real.

A big thanks to the entire team for making it possible to bring you this volume with the quality and reading experience you deserve.

If you haven't checked out our website yet, you're missing out on sooo much! Special thanks to all the readers who made things even more entertaining with their comments. See you in the next volume!

Eduardo

Dev

I'm Overworked.

The Real Eduardo

Definitely not akiso

I'm not Overworked.

Saku

Editor

English really is an amazing language, so versatile, almost like C. Working on this volume made me appreciate that even more. If Japanese is Morishita's makeshift gun, then English is the pair of chopsticks, rubber bands, and jury-rigged trigger she used to pull it off. It takes Morishita-level skill to handle it properly (few head pats to myself)

On a side note, my prediction for Y3 end is we won't be getting a fully conclusive conclusion. There are simply too many plot points scattered by Kinu to tie up neatly in the remaining space. Which is exactly why I'm kinda excited for the possible sequel, maybe a university arc, or the political one.

Anyway, time to finally return to my Billions binge. Adiós.

Meihara Fuyu

Translator

This project was fun! I'm looking forward to reading the next volume before everybody else too. Tho if Hashimoto sinks my new ship (HiyoXKiyo), then imma scratch them name from the TL, erased from history and stuff.. (JK)

NotInvented

Dev

I hope you enjoyed this volume despite the long wait. Thanks for your patience!

ChemicallyUnstable

Proofreader

Are Kiyotaka Ayanokoji's action evil or justified? Do the ends justify the means, and is he truly acting for the greater good? Is his final goal of being defeated possible?

RI || Great Love

Translator

Hi! I am RI || Great Love (and yes this name is from the reference of the Novel Reverend Insanity. Btw RI & COTE is currently my favourite of all time.)

Anyways, I would like to express my deepest gratitude towards the Anime Anyway team for letting me be a part of their team. I feel honored to be a part of this team.

And I would also like to thank my dear community members for believing in us till this time. Your time and support is what keeps us going forward even in difficulty.

Getting this volume was a bit of a challenge this time. I had to make several trips to Tokyo, only to find it unavailable every single time, right up until just a day before the official release. After all those failed attempts and disappointment, we finally managed to get our hands on it in the end.

I hope God blesses us this beautiful time till the very end! Looking forward to a better future. See you in the next volume!

NanotechPikachu

Proofreader

Gimme nitro in my discord DMs else imma kill y'all! (joking)

Violet

Translator

I hope Koji ain't lying abt his feelings for Hiyori.

Tr577

Translator

Loved tling this volume but I am burned out now. Gonna take a long rest.

Anyways, Here's some insider info on things we are working on, For the next volume we are planning to [Redacted] which will make this sooo better and it will also have [Redacted] which you guys are gonna LOVE. Can't wait for these to be done. Hopefully, Akiso doesn't redact these.

Will see you in the next volume!